

DEVELOPING PROJECTS

Theatre Projects, fast approaching its 40th anniversary, has undergone more than a few changes in recent years. Lee Baldock visited the company's base in Greenford, Middlesex, to catch up with the story

September 1997 will witness the 40th anniversary of the day when a young lighting designer by the name of Richard Pilbrow started his own company and called it Theatre Projects. Since then, the success of that company, and of the man who created it, has been outstanding. When L+SI covered the 35th anniversary of Theatre Projects back in November 1992, Pilbrow recalled: "It was hard to imagine why anybody would pay me to light a show. Why should they? The recipe was to rent out old, borrowed, begged or stolen lights and live off the proceeds. But times were obviously very ripe, for the plan worked."

It did indeed work, producing some of the world's most formidable theatre lighting talents in the process. Names such as David Hersey, Robert Ornbo, Bob Bryan, John B. Read, Nick Chelton, Howard Eldridge, Andrew Bridge, Benny Ball and the late Steve Kemp, all did their time with Richard Pilbrow at Theatre Projects. It was an exciting and innovative period for those involved, with Pilbrow actively encouraging young designers to take on new challenges. Early on, Pilbrow and Robert Ornbo began using the maxim, 'If we can get through the weekend, we can get through anything' - a necessary attitude, if Pilbrow's version of their methods is to be believed. He said of that time: "We constantly had to find new ways, because we didn't know what the old ones were!"

There is evidently a degree of modesty in Richard Pilbrow that may lead you to think that the success of the early Theatre Projects owed



Greenford: TP staff are joined by their allies from Vari-Lite Europe, Brilliant Stages and CPL.

more to luck than to judgement, with he and the other designers scraping through successive productions, managing time after time to pull the wool over the eyes of their clients. Of course, the truth is that Pilbrow and co were an extremely talented group of young designers who were always exploring, developing and expanding their art: this was what lay behind the establishment of Theatre Projects as the most respected design house in the business.

The advent of Theatre Projects Consultants (who split from Theatre Projects in 1984) was a natural progression for Richard Pilbrow, as his passion for theatre and his burgeoning experience of production techniques led his energies toward the overall design of the theatre space. He recognised how very poor were the designs of theatres built in the 1960s, because they prioritised sightline and acoustic 'efficiency' over the audience itself - sacrificing the 'feel' or 'intimacy' of the theatre experience.



London's VE Day celebration in May 1995 was an example of the one-off events which are a speciality for Theatre Projects.

photo: Julian Calverley

The realisation that the Victorians knew what they were up to after all led TPC to concentrate on combining the attributes of the Victorian theatre (in Pilbrow's words, "human scale, three-dimensional, intimate") with the needs of modern production techniques and technology. Today, many highly successful theatres around the world have benefited from the applied expertise of TPC.

Since the article in 1992, there have been many developments in the story of Theatre Projects, although the success of the operation has continued unhindered. The company continues as a major player in the European rental market and still offers a first-class design service from its in-house team, the difference being that the company is now owned by their former stable-mate, the mighty Vari-Lite of Dallas, Texas.

So what brought about this structural metamorphosis? The cause was a souring relationship between the management of Eagle Trust, who owned Samuelson, and Vari-Lite's European operation, who were themselves 'owned' by Samuelson since 1986 under a 10-year franchise. As Vari-Lite sought ways to pull back their interests from Eagle Trust, the end of the 10-year franchise was drawing nearer. Eagle Trust wanted to renew the deal, VL didn't. The solution to the impasse was that VL would buy themselves back and in order to overcome the problem of what to do with the building, which also housed Samuelson's other irons in the fire, namely Theatre Projects and Brilliant Stages, VL's Rusty Brutsché agreed to take the lot. And there you have it, except that TP Sound, the other element in the equation, stayed on with Samuelson.

Meanwhile, Richard Pilbrow continues to keep himself busy with Theatre Projects Consultants, basing himself in the United States. He continues to be paid money for lighting shows (currently *Showboat* in Los Angeles), although the reasons for this are perhaps less of a mystery to him now than they were all those years ago. He has also written a new book on lighting design, which is due to be published in the very near future. But Pilbrow's association with Theatre Projects, it seems, will never be lost entirely.

Alan Thomson, now managing director of TP and Concert Production Lighting (CPL), explains that a great deal of confusion still exists about the links between Theatre Projects and Pilbrow's TPC. He says: "People still say to me 'give my regards to Richard', as if they think I work in the room next door - but there are no links."

None, at least, other than those explained by Brian Croft, who was general manager of TP in the early 80s, prior to Samuelson's involvement and is now managing director of Vari-Lite Europe. He explained: "The only links now are the personal friendship that we still have and the fact that Richard recognised, at a very early stage, the importance of moving lights in the theatre." This friendship between the men began many years ago. Croft and Pilbrow go back many years together, and Thomson had first worked with him in the early 1970s on a production of *Showboat*. That this relationship is sustained today was clearly evidenced by



Two shows from Theatre Projects' CV at Earls Court, London. Above, the *Royal Tournament* and, below, *Aida*, 1991.



Richard Pilbrow's kind agreement to rise bright and early from his Los Angeles hotel bed and link up with us on a conference call on the day of my visit.

So now two men who do work virtually next door to each other at Greenford (at opposite ends of a large room, in fact) are Alan Thomson and Brian Croft. Their respective workforces are positioned in the expanse between their offices, divided by little more than an invisible frontier: TP to the right, VL to the left - surely a sign of a healthy alliance.

Thomson has 25 years' experience in the industry, particularly in lighting for the theatre. He joined Theatre Projects in 1985 as production co-ordinator and his progress through the ranks since then has been impressive, becoming general manager within 18 months, a director after five years and managing director after nine.

His staff includes customer operations manager Peter Marshall, who heads up a team of three, concentrating on the theatrical, industrial and event markets. Marshall has spent 15 years in lighting, and has toured the USA, Europe and Asia with a number of musical and dance productions. Carol Croft, who previously worked in the industrial and theatre markets for TP, now takes responsibility for the activities of CPL, the company's specialist music industry division, and has handled tours for Paul McCartney, Pink Floyd and the Stones. Head of theatre productions and lighting design

is Michael Odam (see L+SI In Profile, November 1996), whose lighting career has run through an impressive list of the world's most successful musical productions, including *Joseph*, *Les Mis*, *Phantom*, *My Fair Lady*, *Aspects of Love* and *Guys & Dolls*.

Incidentally, it is a company policy, and a fact for all of the above-mentioned staff members, including Thomson, that they have placed a foot on every rung of the ladder on the way to their current posts. As Thomson illustrates: "Everybody started on the road, or with coiling cables in warehouses, for instance. We're not interested in advertising in national newspapers for managers - our people come from within the industry."

Since the events of 1994, the signs seem to suggest that TP is enjoying being under the able leadership of Alan Thomson, and the stable wing of Vari-Lite. The company has continued to fulfil a very busy workload, consisting of a fairly even spread of live touring, theatre, special events and industrial projects. Alan

Thomson gave a quick run-down of some of the projects underway on the day we met: "Right now, we've got *Status Quo* and *The Cure* on tour in Europe, *Sunset Boulevard* at the Adelphi Theatre, London and at Wiesbaden in Germany, *Phantom of the Opera* at Basel in Switzerland, we've just done the *Motor Show* in Birmingham for Imagination, tonight we've got *Skytrackers* outside a Royal film performance and countless others things that I can't remember off the top of my head!"

The company's workload over the Christmas period included the supply of a temporary installation of over 700 conventional lights and 40 Vari-Lites for the *Joy to the World* carol concert at the Royal Albert Hall, which was televised live by the BBC on Christmas Eve. The rig for this show, supplied for client Unusual Services, was installed and derigged by TP crews in the space of 48 hours. The lighting design for the show was the responsibility of none other than TP veteran Robert Ornbø (who is presumably still managing to get through the weekends). On the architectural side, St. Paul's Cathedral and the Canary Wharf Tower both utilised equipment supplied by TP over Christmas. Another name often associated with Theatre Projects is Durham Marengi, who designed the interior lighting at St. Paul's for the Imperial Cancer Research Fund Christmas Carol Service. Marengi's previous record with the company encompasses events such as Roger Waters' *The Wall* concert in Berlin in 1990 and the National Day Celebrations in Oman in 1995. In a separate festive project, the pyramid atop the Canary Wharf Tower turned Christmas Tree-esque, being bathed in green light courtesy of 400 Par cans, run from a Celco 30-way console.

Recent years have brought some changes to the market areas with which TP have been involved. There are now less of the larger industrial events, with the once spectacular, big-budget product launches giving way to more low-key practices, as Thomson explains: "A lot of the high-profile industrial work, with the choreographed shows and disappearing cars has been replaced by video presentations,

or perhaps live satellite broadcasts to dealers. That market has now moved over to the operators in those areas."

But another developing market has ensured that the company do not miss the work, as they still carry out a great deal of projects for industrial 'roadshows', described by Thomson as: "... the MD of a company and his financial advisers shooting around Britain or Europe, trying to sell confidence in their companies. We do quite a lot of that type of work for Imagination. We recently did our first roadshow for the Millennium project, again for Imagination, and there are a couple more in the pipeline."

Details of the actual Millennium project remain vague at this point (see news this month), but it seems that TP will have their hands full with the biggest bash that the country has ever seen. This, though, is TP's speciality: the Big Event. Recent history shows that TP are very much geared to deal with the big ones. The Wall, Aida at Earls Court, major tours by Pink Floyd and the Stones, Royal Tournaments, the VE and VJ Day celebrations of last year - the list is, as we have seen before, an impressive one.

So what is there that TP haven't had a hand in? Well, the tours have been a bit on the quiet side of late, but Alan Thomson explained why this isn't a problem for TP: "We haven't done any of the major ones this summer - Bon Jovi, The Eagles, etc, although the funny thing is that a lot of our equipment is still used on those projects, even though we don't handle them as the main contractor. For example, we bid for a Michael Jackson tour some time ago and didn't get it, but we still rented 35 motor hoists out to the company that did, which were out on tour for nearly 17 months - on very reasonable terms!"

As Thomson points out, 1996 brought with it no VE Day or VJ Day anniversary celebrations, and the absence of a Rolling Stones or a Take That tour may have contributed to making the year seem uncharacteristically dull for TP - on the surface, at least. However, the new year may well turn out to be a different story, with a number of big-name tours in the offing (including Phil Collins), but we will, of course, have to wait and see.

One of the ironies of the relationship between TP as one of Europe's major rental houses and VL as one of the world's foremost moving light manufacturers is the inevitable, if



Pictured at Theatre Projects' Greenford headquarters in 1992 are (left to right) Alan Thomson, Brian Croft and company founder Richard Pilbrow.

occasional, clash of interests. Although TP's workload is spread all over Europe, Greenford remains their only premises, whereas VL have centres in France, Germany, Austria, Belgium and Scandinavia which, despite the close relationship, are effectively rival companies to TP. Thomson illustrates the position: "We're doing *Sunset Boulevard* in Wiesbaden and we probably competed against a Vari-Lite sub-distributor in Germany to get it."

TP may also be asked to supply a moving light system from a manufacturer other than Vari-Lite, but that's the nature of the rental business and it doesn't ruffle too many feathers in Dallas. What's clear is that Thomson needs a certain degree of autonomy from Vari-Lite in order to successfully operate a European rental company of the stature of Theatre Projects, and that is what he gets.

When asked if there were plans to extend their area of operation in the future, Thomson added: "We've obviously got our eye on one or two main markets that we don't think are properly supplied at present. We will perhaps move in to these areas eventually, although it will be very much in the role of technical and logistical support for Vari-Lites. The reason I say that is that there will not be the traditional theatre, touring or industrial markets in the areas that we are looking at."

TP have exclusive UK distribution rights for Wybron's Autopilot system, launched at PLASA 94, where it won the Best New Product award.

Rather surprisingly, the system hasn't done quite as well in the UK as Thomson expected. He explains: "Autopilot is a very, very good product, but people just don't seem to have picked up on it. I think one of the reasons is that it kind of negates the designer's role. In a way it doesn't need the designer to place the lights and they think 'I won't use that because it will put me out of a job'. We recently worked with Welsh television on a kind of Opportunity Knocks show, where they did 18 acts in a day. So every act that came on just had a belt-pack pinned to them and off they went - the lights followed them everywhere - the show was never in the dark because they didn't have time to re-shoot. Autopilot was absolutely ideal from that point of view."

An area in which the company has been making extensive efforts is that of software development for the control of Sky-Arts searchlights, which are manufactured by TP. In the cavernous warehouse at Greenford, Thomson showed us where the Sky-Arts control software package was undergoing final testing. This package provides full status information on pan, tilt, dimming levels, focus and colour, overseeing all the light's characteristics, including head temperature, bulb temperature and bulb current. This project is an example of the company's commitment to high quality service.

Another large investment has been made in having every one of the thousands of items in



TP's customer operations manager Peter Marshall.



Alan Thomson demonstrates Theatre Projects' software control package for Sky Arts searchlights.



Concert Production Lighting's Carol Croft.



Theatre Projects supplied the lighting for the Joy to the World televised carol concert at the Royal Albert Hall, London, Christmas 1996. The rig included over 700 conventional fixtures and 40 Vari*Lite's, with lighting design by Robert Ornbo. Photo: Julian Calverley

the company's stocks bar-coded, in order to provide instantaneous hire histories for everything from a cable to a Par can to a control console. It begins to become clear just what a laborious and highly expensive process this must be when you see the extent of the equipment stored at Greenford, but it will streamline the hire service and help to reduce costs in the long term. Thomson demonstrated the value of this by pointing out the sheared end of a power cable among some returned stock.

"This has clearly been damaged, but instead of just having to swallow the cost of replacement ourselves, we can find out very quickly who used this last, and when and where."

Evidently, as they push on towards their 40th anniversary, Theatre Projects are confidently continuing the tradition of success begun by Richard Pilbrow in 1957. They have an enviable reputation built on many years of high quality service and experience, a progressive attitude, firm backing from Dallas and the right

products, workforce and systems in place to head into their fifth decade. Thomson informed me that the exact details of the 40th anniversary celebrations are secret, but Richard Pilbrow has been making preparations and is keen to hold two parties, one in London and one in New York, which will possibly be satellite-linked(!). This is presumably to give as many people as possible a fair go at taking part in the celebrations. A thoroughly commendable approach.

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