Laserpoint in the Headlights

Roger St. Pierre talked to Laserpoint's Andy Holmes about the company's latest production: the launch of the new Rover 800 Vitesse Fastback at the NEC in Birmingham.

It may come as a shock to hear Andy Holmes' view that too much money has been wasted on lasers, especially since he owns Laserpoint, one of the world leaders in the field. So let's quickly qualify that viewpoint.

What Andy is saying is that the important thing is "not what you do but the way that you do it".

"People have gone out and spent a fortune on lasers, simply because it seemed the 'thing' to do, without spending enough time working out the application," he told me. "Thankfully, all that is changing rapidly. The understanding of lasers and what they can do and, consequently, the way they are used, has become far more inventive - people are getting a lot more from their systems these days.

"We put a lot of emphasis on really getting to grips with the way in which potential customers can get the best return for what is still a considerable investment, even though prices have remained stable despite the effects of inflation. Never mind more power, brighter colours and so on. 'What do you really need from your laser?' is the question we ask potential customers. The effect itself is only half the story - where it is fitted, and how it is controlled and how it is used; that's what really counts," he continued.

Established in January 1978, Laserpoint -still based in Cambridge but now boasting sales offices in both London and Copenhagen - is into its second decade and can claim to be the oldest laser display company in the UK: "Laser Media in America pre-dates us by three years and there was a previous British company which went bust," said Andy. Britain's second oldest company in the field is Laser Creations, set up in 1980 by Chris Matthews, who was Andy's original partner in Laserpoint.

"We now have 28 people on our payroll at Cambridge, four in London and four in Copenhagen - our office there was set up 18 months ago and is doing well for us. One of their big jobs is laserscanning for a spectacular show featuring 12 strippers - and Scandanavian strippers are good!"

Exports have always figured heavily in the Laserpoint story - currently accounting for around 80 per cent of turnover. "We got into Europe very early on and now our Spanish connections give us a good bridge into South America while the Danish office has opened up Scandanavia to us and from London we have great connections into the Far East and the old Empire. We are currently collaborating with Belgian and French companies in a major Olympic Games project in Seoul, South Korea.

"Within the company we have people who can speak Italian, French, German, Danish, Spanish and one of our service engineers is married to a Brazilian girl while another has a Korean wife. It's proved a great way to get into export markets! At the moment we have a contact setting a company up in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

"In our first year we had a turnover of £40,000. This year we have topped £3m in our UK operation alone and £4½m overall. We've shown a regular annual growth of 70 per cent and that is helped by having 28 agents in as many countries.

"Really, when it comes to selling big laser installations there are only the British and Americans in contention. We are far more likely to find ourselves quoting for a job against say Laser Creations than against a German or Japanese company, or even, for that matter, the Americans, wherever in the world the potential client is located.

"Half our work is with clubs and discotheques, the rest with major trade shows, exhibitions, stage productions and the like. We buy-in the laser tube but we build the effects head and control systems and create the software in-house, producing all our own metalwork, printed circuits and so on.

"Servicing is a major part of our job and we have service engineers working in Brisbane, Madrid and on a Broadway show, right at this minute," explained Andy.

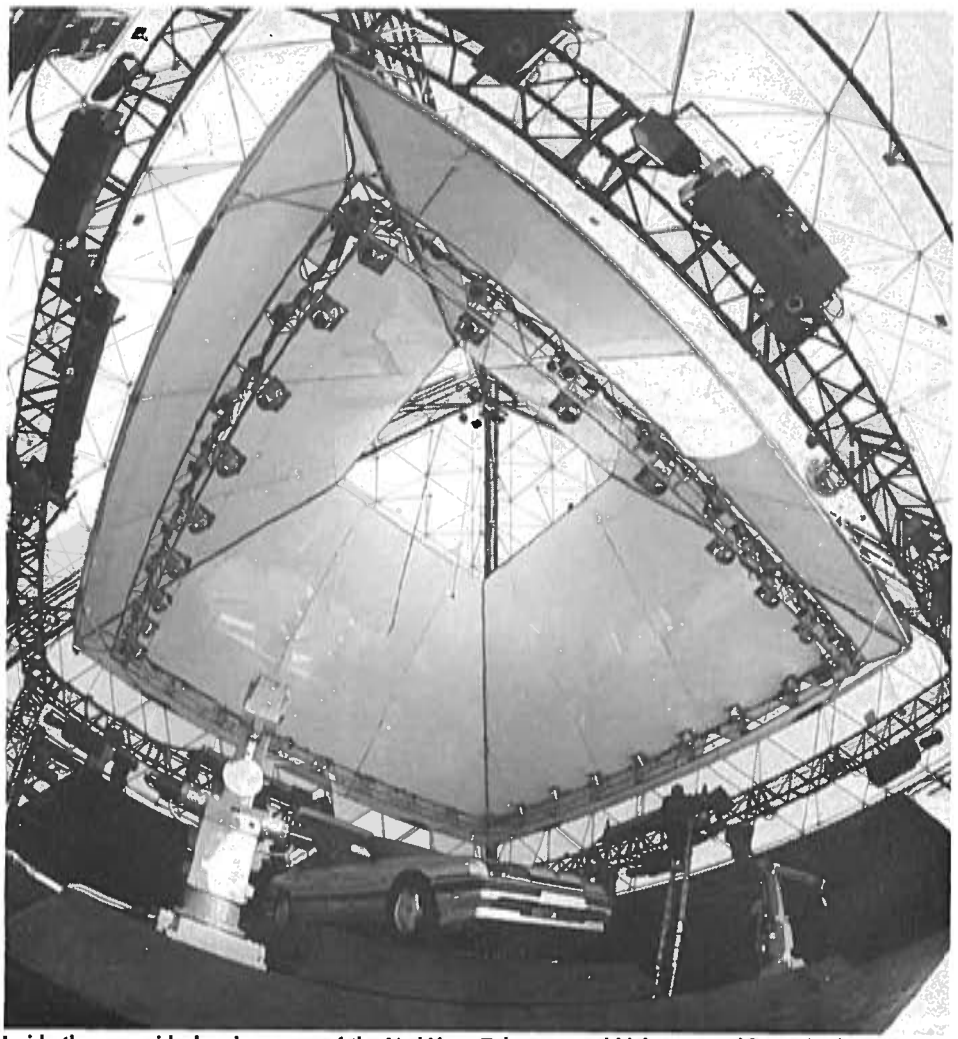
Laserpoint's most exciting recent project was at Birmingham's National Exhibition Centre over the May bank holiday weekend.

"As part of the worldwide launch of the new Rover 800 Vitesse Fastback, we were asked to create a spectacular laser and lighting extravaganza to coincide with independent television's Telethon charity event," said Andy.

On the expansive lakeside setting at the NEC Laserpoint in conjunction with Park Avenue Productions built a 15-metre high white pyramid, inside which a very special version of the Rover car was mounted on a computer-controlled revolving stage. What made the car so special was that it was packed full of lasers and lights as the centrepiece of what was one of the biggest and most innovative laser events yet staged in Britain. The car was stripped of its engine, seats and brakes to make room for all the laser gear.

Two four-watt Argon lasers were built into the engine compartment, with single-scanner pairs mounted inside each of the headlamp units. These produced staccato beams, fans and cones of laser light from the headlamps. Two further four-watt Argon lasers were built into the passenger compartment of the vehicle. One of these was fitted with a vertical scanning head, designed to project a multitude of effects from the remotely-controlled electric sun-roof. The second laser was fitted with a conventional single scan effects-head, firing beams, fans and cones out of the rear hatch of the vehicle, which was opened by the largest of the three robots used in the display.

An assortment of conventional lighting mounted inside the vehicle gave an eerie, unreal feeling to the setting while, within the structure of the pyramid itself, were placed



Inside the pyramid, showing some of the Vari-Lites, Telescans and high powered lasers in the truss.

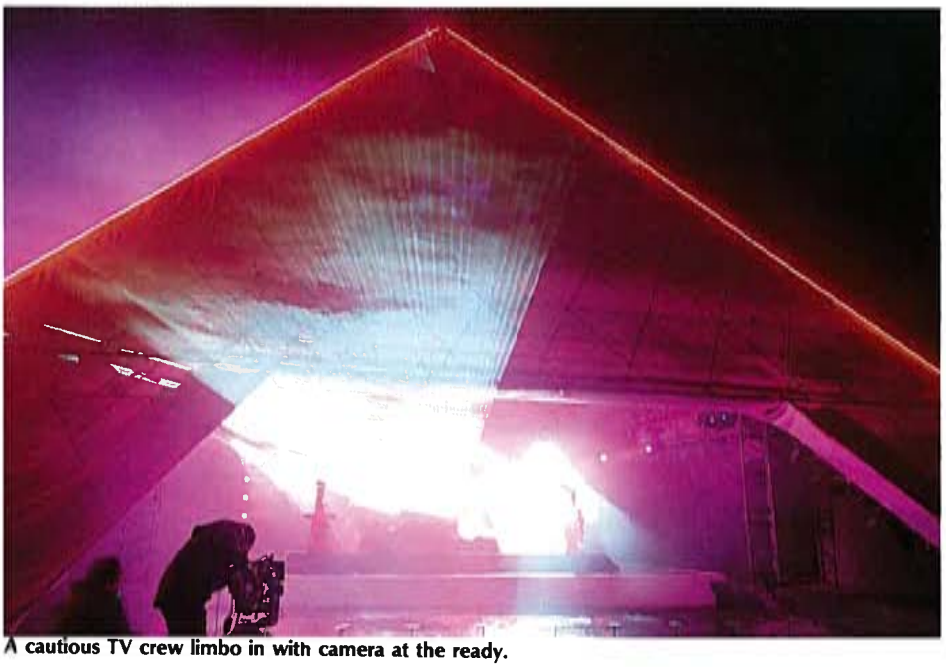
two 20-watt Argon lasers and one five-watt Krypton laser, positioned high up inside the roof to give an exciting laser display around the car and robots.

The three ASEA industrial robots positioned around the car were programmed to perform a series of functions, from the positioning of the mirrors and diffraction gratings into the laser beams, as part of the visual aspect of the show, to opening the rear hatch to allow the laser to fire out. These robot characters were carefully choreographed to bring a surrealistic but almost human element to the all-action show.

A further two 20-watt Argon lasers were used for aerial work across the skies of suburban Birmingham and the surrounding countryside - one of them mounted on the roof of Hall Five of the NEC, and the other on the roof of the Metropole Hotel, adjacent to the exhibition complex. They were supported by a five-watt Argon laser on the roof of the arena building, overlooking the lake, and, finally, this amazing visual experience was completed by a Coherent 70-4 with twin-scan image-projecting effects, writing giant messages on the side walls of Hall One!

The 11 lasers used in this fantastic display were backed up with an impressive display of supportive lighting equipment, including 30 Vari-Lite One's, 12 telescans and four 2.5k Sky Tracker searchlights.

With the entire pyramid trimmed in red neon, the overall result was a spectacular display of precision movement and light. The complete show was programmed and cued through an AVL Genesis and X15 play-back modules which synchronised the 11 lasers, 45 moving lights, the rotating-and-tilting car and the opening inner pyramid!



A cautious TV crew limbo in with camera at the ready.

"We were able to let our imaginations run riot." said Andy. "We had started talking about the show towards the end of April, got the go-ahead on May 9 and had just over two weeks to get the whole thing designed, built, and rehearsed in a movie studio at Shepperton. It was a really exciting challenge and we were delighted with the way it turned out."

Credits

Client: Michael O'Hara
Austin Rover Group Ltd
Agency: Dorlands Advertising
Production: Derrick Tuke-Hastings
Park Avenue Productions plc
Lasers: Andy Holmes/Simon Molseed
Laserpoint Limited
Lighting Designer: Simon Tapping
Set Designer: Mike Desmond
P.A.: Lars Brogaard
Electrotec

The new Rover 800 Fastback in position on its rotating and tilting turntable. The industrial robots hold their mirrors aloft.

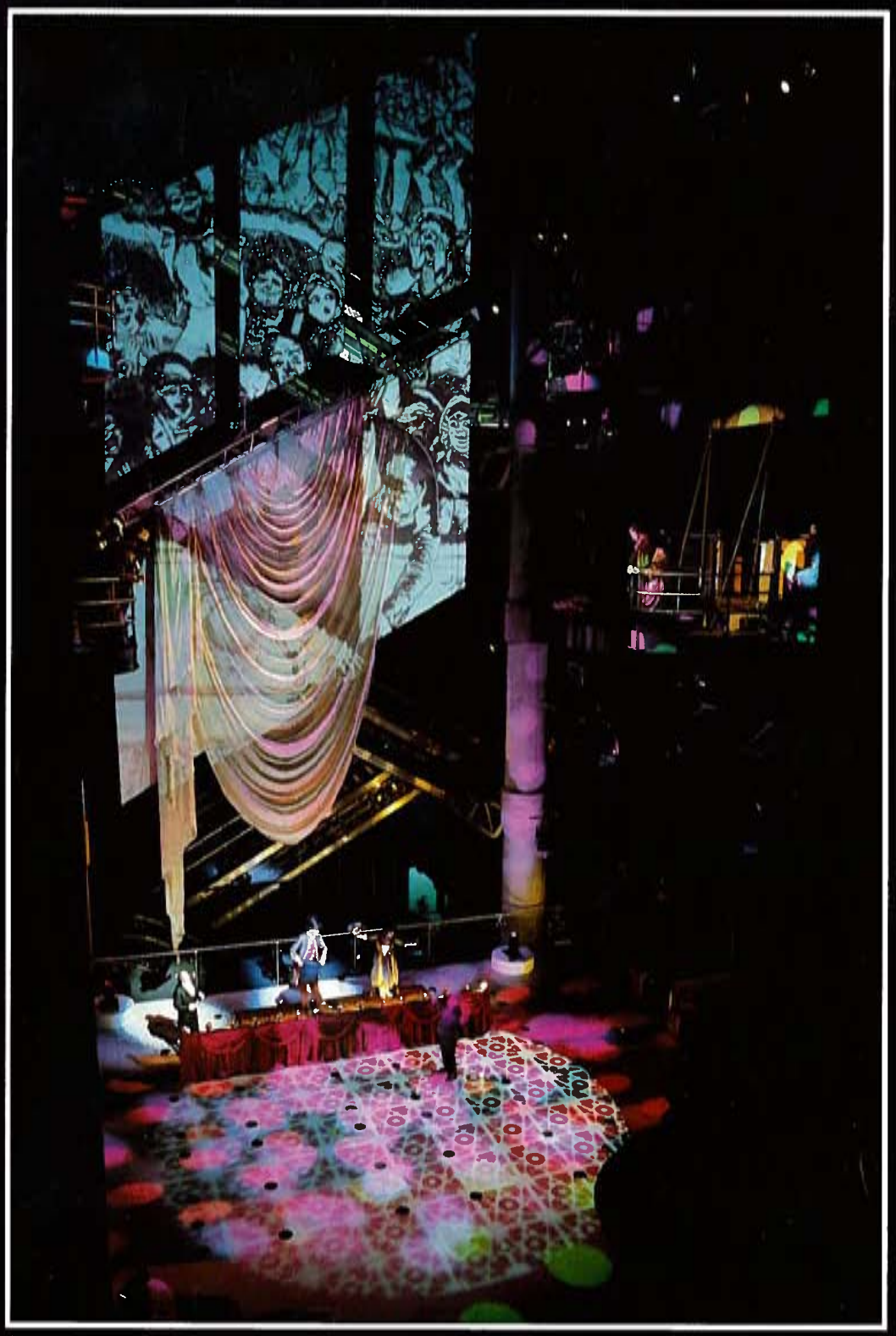
With the engine removed, the two 5 watt argon lasers fill the top half of the under bonnet space.

Special windows were cut in the headlamps to accommodate the laser outputs.

Another view of the Rover's laser headlamps in action.

The headlamp lasers shine out across the NEC.

LIGHTING+SOUND International



Tercentenary Show in the Lloyd's of London building - see cover story page 5

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