

THEATRE DESIGN & TECHNOLOGY MAGAZINE

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LETTER in Response to 1991 Winter column:

Dear Charlie Richmond,

I've just had to take a couple of days in a darkened room to recover from my apoplexy. I read your article for TD&T Winter 1991, in the ABTT NEWS, March 1991 (is this technology getting ahead of itself or what?). I'm sorry, I just cannot let yet another article in this vein go unrefuted.

First, the premise that 'automation is best' has to be the daftest extrapolation of the use of technology in the theatre. The Orwell-style picture of a Central Controller is frightening - at least you did admit, albeit briefly, that live performances can't ever do without live technical supervision and expertise - phew!, I thought at one point we were about to be introduced to a Central Control Computer called HAL (or do we still wait 10 years for that?).

I have to address your question about the difference between a Stage Manager giving the GO cue to an Lx Op who executes it, and the SM executing the cue. The difference is that in the first instance there is someone free to sort out the problem when the computer goes wrong, or a bulb blows. The SM is left in contact with the show, free to follow the show, and able to formulate alternative plans without the distraction of sorting out the fault.

You say you have "always" been bothered by the time-lapse on technical cues in the theatre. You suggest that a light switch could be connected (via an "authorize" circuit) to - to what? To the Lx Ops big toe? (Who warns him to stop playing cards and look?). So, now, the actor must still hover for a few seconds after the loud click while the cue is authorized and the Lx Op responds. I don't know what happens when the next scene is not following the last in direct time sequence and our switch is now in the wrong position. Might I suggest you go and see shows that have paid properly for an experienced stage manager who can easily anticipate the cue to allow for operator reaction time? I also think the majority of Stage Managers might rightly feel indignant at this slur on us over one of the simplest manifestations of our working art. Of course, it does help if the SM can see the light switch (don't they teach designers things like that anymore?)

Next, I'm not so sure you could prove that all this new-fangled technology in the theatre is so safe, reliable and cost-effective. I write as one who has had to push many a heavy stage truck against the resistance of a dead motor. I agree that the existence of fancy technology has made producers and directors more ambitious - but often they over-reach themselves (especially financially) and then have to skimp on other areas - such as the expertise to manage the production safely. Neither am I sure that the stories I hear from Disneyland and Universal indicate

that technology-drive "live" shows do "run without hiccup thousands of times". There can be no substitute for a properly trained and motivated stage manager, with a team of thinking people. Don't get me wrong - I'm grateful I don't have to whistle cues up to the flies anymore, but the more we are hedged about by expensive equipment the less is the enjoyment, the less is the hand-on feel of the performance, and the less are the financial resources put in to our area. Is it any wonder many give up or move on?

Now I come to the quoted introduction to Mr. Huntington's Master's Thesis (maybe it's a Comedy Degree - I certainly hope he's not going to teach Stage Managers with it!). "Talking to people on headsets"! "Following the script on _paper_"! Those bad old days, eh? I'm sorry to read he is forced to look up from the 3D Video game to see if the actor is in the right position before "authorizing" the cue - perhaps the actor could authorize it himself with a radio button in his cufflink? (Actually I think I'd fire any Stage Manager not paying full attention to the show.) I'm sure it's a pity that the Wardrobe Department "haven't got their robotics cost-effective yet." I really look forward to the day when I can press a button to "authorize" the Quick Change Robots to strip and re-dress 16 dancers for the Finale. Would someone like to get a quote from Miss Elaine Strich on this?

Seriously, though, the underlying mistake you, and other contributors to technical magazines, seem to make is that you think theatre is Real. It is not. Theatre is make-believe. Theatre is selectively holding up a mirror to life - it is not real life. The actor who, in his own home may be capable of many complicated technical things, does not need to be distracted by the intricacies of an audio system or a coffee machine, when he is trying to portray a character in a situation, not his virtuosity with levers and cogs.

"Canned" entertainment, sir, does not only come out of a TV tube - aspirations like those expressed by you (and by many others in others in other technical magazines) we are in great danger of "canning" the performances of live actors in technological strait-jackets. Also I'm tired of people misunderstanding the use of stage managers.

Yours sincerely,
Kevin E Mullery, Stage Manager
Twickenham, England

Charlie Richmond responds:

Mr. Mullery brings up some interesting points while exhibiting a degree of paranoia which, as I had said in my original article would certainly be a common response. To be fair, since he wrote this letter I have spoken with Mr. Mullery and his attitude has been tempered somewhat by time - thank goodness for both of us. He said he looked forward to my reply (which will appear in the 1992 Winter Sound Column) and I said I was just glad to finally get a letter in response to my increasingly radical writing!