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PART III: THE GAUNTLET RUN

By Charlie Richmond

In much the same way that publicity is good for public figures, reader response is food for columnists. Because the former is not always positive, the phrase "any publicity is good publicity" exists; likewise writers rejoice at anything more than anonymous pasted-together ransom notes. While Timothy Buchman's note is not anonymously written, I welcome the opportunity to advance the dialogue on my (current) favorite topic by responding to it even though, like publicly acknowledging ransom notes, it may only serve to both endanger the hostage and raise the stakes. But, as usual, radical writing begets a radical response and that may be what I deserve.

While I agree that "A Seasonal Sample" is important, it is only partly fiction. The fictional part is largely contained in the premise that performers would use such high tech equipment in an audition. I suspect (but have no way of knowing for sure) that most auditions these days use either cheap cassette machines or old out-of-tune pianos for accompaniment. What is mostly non-fiction is the description of how high tech gear is used in actual performances today.

Though I cannot speak for *The Mixer*, I suspect the purpose of the tale is more to caution us against complacency in the face of mediocrity than to advocate we all become Luddites. In fact, the author is a theatre sound designer who willingly uses some of the most advanced digital audio cuing equipment specifically to avoid such mediocrity. Show control in the wrong hands can easily become a mediocre 'juggernaut' in the same way that singing in Broadway hits can be fake. What I am advocating instead is both responsible show control and, similarly, if the producer demands the singing be canned, that it shouldn't sound fake.

The problems described in the Ruling piece ("Automated Sound on a Budget," *Theatre Crafts*, November 1991, p. 72) and those of early memory light boards are ones which are inevitable in the process of technical development. The difficulties with the Macs simply demonstrate the unique problem of sound control within the theatrical environment. The recording industry comprises the largest market for sound equipment and the unfortunate tendency for many consultants, designers and technicians alike is to use or adapt this recording equipment to theatrical use, whereas the proper choice would be to use equipment specifically designed for the theatre. Lord knows I've been preaching about this long enough. But experience ultimately shows the way and anything that impedes the technical process will quickly be thrust into the corner. The proper equipment will eventually find its rightful place - 'eventually' being the key.

It is unfortunate that, although Mr. Buchman exhibits considerable technical knowledge, he has apparently not yet seen

the current state-of-the-art in reliable software and hardware for control of theatre sound. I expect that, once this happens, his story will be different - replete with reports of speed, reliability and flexibility. These days, to achieve total reliability, the largest spare component required is a cheap, easily serviced off-the-shelf microcomputer. Hundreds of productions mounted everywhere from high schools to Broadway using "cheap, quick and reliable" audio cuing equipment make it self evident this technology has arrived.

At the risk of splitting hairs, I must defend using the word 'paranoia' in describing Kevin Mullery's response - especially since he himself verbally acknowledged his response came perhaps too close to that. One could apply the more commonly used popular sense of the word to those who see their less skilled tasks gradually being taken away from them and, as a result, fear for their jobs. Here, it is hard to be sympathetic to someone who does not see this as an opportunity for advancement. I never intended to imply anyone would suffer from a genuine mental disease as a result of the proliferation of MIDI Show Control, however. But when Mr. Buchman describes an entire touring ice show as "well-lit" with 50 Vari*Lites and then claims three assumptions which I never stated are the basis of my thesis, it may be cause for concern...

Even if those assumptions were implied in my original article - and I do not believe they were - the examples provided by Mr. Buchman do not adequately substantiate them and I will show why. But first, rather than rejecting the assumptions outright, I'll stick my neck out and rephrase them to more accurately conform to my original theme - not to make them the basis of an entire philosophy, but definitely an integral part of it. Here they are:

- 1) Most problems can be solved with the application of appropriate technology.
- 2) An important part of a stage manager's job consists of following a script and calling cues at the appropriate time.
- 3) Theatre technicians should not be given tasks and responsibilities which are better done by machines or computers.

I'm not trying to be coy with this last item - the show will just be better if everyone's job requires thought. If someone is doing some mindless task, they will feel less involved, be more distracted and seem more like they are not needed. We must find that person a job which elevates their position above the mediocre and provides them with a feeling of capability.

I enjoy telling what happened all too often when I ran sound for "The Importance of Being Earnest." Because there were only 12 cues in the entire show, I sometimes forgot to preset the levels correctly or to cue the tape. It wasn't because I wasn't interested in what I was doing; on the contrary, the production was excellent and I enjoyed every single performance. If anything, it was because I enjoyed the show so much that I

forgot I had things to do between cues that were not immediately related to it. I always did the right thing when the cues were called because they were a necessary and integral part of the show. What was forgotten were the rote mechanical procedures required as preparation for each cue and which could have just as easily been done electronically. If you're thinking I must not have been a very good operator, you're right - and it was this experience that made me stick to designing sound and eventually turn to manufacturing theatre sound equipment.

Now, on the subject of empowering: I am not saying the actor always has to control technical cues. If stage managers would rather do things the 'old fashioned' way, they still may do so using even more varied methods of execution. For example, they may call the cue directly through the show control system so the delay incurred by the light op need not be anticipated or they may even include that person in the loop.

Filament lag is a known phenomenon, however, and if I'm going to be accused of being academic, let's proceed hypothetically. Theatrical spaces are often larger than the spaces they portray and sometimes this can help. If an actor clicks a switch which is on the average 50 feet or more from most of the audience, they will hear the click approximately 50 milliseconds or more after the filament begins to react. This compensates for filament lag since the aural perception of the click more closely coincides with the visual perception of the light going on or off. Finally, it is not usually the response of the stage lighting, where most instruments with filament lag are used, which is the most disturbing when not synchronized - it is the practicals, since they respond quickly and are part of the character's microcosm of reality. It is quite possible to have the practicals controlled by the actors and the stage lighting called by the SM - both through the same show control system.

If an actor wishes not to be responsible for flying pieces, there is no need to be. Incidentally, Mr. Buchman's gender assignment is interesting since many of the best stage managers I know are women. 'Authorized' commands are a serious matter and hardly 'nonsense' created just for liability's sake - the idea that a show control system should fly in a set piece purely as a result of a video scanned gesture is the height of irresponsibility. The difference between doing something simply because it is technically possible and providing a complex but safe performance environment is basic professionalism. In fact, our lawyers hope that one of the first jobs HAL 9000 will do when he/she comes to work in the theatre is to warn actors when they get too close to open elevator pits. Joking aside, such safety functions are the highest priorities of most show control system designs.

I'm not sure how the assistance of a show control system will, as Mr. Buchman implies, impair the stage manager's ability to maintain the production - it seems just the reverse should occur. I also fail to follow the logic which says that a stage manager who reads music should have an assistant conductor call some of the cues, although they both can easily be tied into the same show control system. Nor am I saying that there should not be a

live body responsible for the production of Sound Cue 56 when required. If Mr Buchman reviews my previous writings, he will see that, rather than advocating operators' jobs be cut, I am trying to make those jobs less mechanical.

Overworked certainly, underpaid perhaps, but I'm definitely not a member of any faculty - except perhaps that proverbial school of Hard Knox. I have no delusions of over staffing in these tough times, and am most sympathetic to the needs of overworked stage managers, technicians and stagehands. In fact, isn't the alleviation of this overwork a large part of my thesis? If this was misunderstood, then I truly failed to make a basic point! The point is, when all hands are full on a regular basis, where is the margin for error? It sounds as though crews are being downsized simply because of mechanization and not because of the added security which show control systems could provide. Can this be a safe move? Let's hope the regional theatre winch articles of the future will explain how to use a show control system to make them safe!

To be the devil's advocate for a moment, perhaps Mr. Buchman has a solution for saving the "invalid." If so, I'm sure it would be of interest to us all - maybe it would even create a larger market for theatre sound equipment and make me especially happy. He may be right that the intrusion of technology is a problem, but I maintain it is only because some technology has been poorly implemented, drawing attention to itself and away from the performance it is intended to enhance. Indeed, theme parks _are_ developing a desire for live theatre and are creating theatrical productions very successfully. These venues change quickly and if Mr. Buchman has not been to Florida within the last few years he's in for a big surprise. While lip-syncing is still common, live vocals are often considered more appropriate.

Like Mr. Buchman, I also fear the live event may become indistinguishable from the one on video or film; and for the same reasons. The response to this - and the real _challenge_ of our careers - is to make the live event more immediate, more complete, more moving, more vital, more creative and more significant than video or film - in short, more of everything that drives us to stay in this crazy business. Mr. Buchman's opinions, so passionately expressed, convince me we are indeed kindred spirits who believe a great live performance is well worth the trip and expense. But more than anything else, we need to make our audience feel the same.

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