



Nick Chelton provided lighting for *Measure For Measure*, a version by Howard Brenton of Shakespeare's play directed two years ago by William Gaskill at the Northcott, Exeter
 Photograph Nicholas Toyne

How to make light work

Michael Coveney meets two lighting designers, NICK CHELTON and MICK HUGHES

FOR A SECTION of the theatrical community, a rig has nothing to do with oil, an angler has nothing to do with fish and a board has nothing to do with pin-striped suits. For theatrical electricians and the lighting designers they serve, a rig is the long, arduous process of hanging lamps while perilously perched at the top of a ladder or tallescope (a huge, movable platform of tubular structure); the important 'angling' process involves the adjustment of those lamps to the exact and required angle—a technician friend of mine avers that Andy Phillips (late of the Gaskill regime at the Royal Court and co-founder and star turn of White Light, a new hiring and design company) can produce colour on a stage surface by the faintest adjustment of a lamp producing open white light; and the board is the operational means through which a lighting design is

put into practical effect, either manually or by computer.

Most lighting designers come to the job through an apprenticeship first as an electrician and then as a designer's assistant. It is a poorly paid and, in terms of public recognition, unrewarding job. The modern British theatre has seen three outstanding, innovative technicians in the persons of Joe Davis, Richard Pilbrow and the afore-mentioned Phillips. There is now springing up in their wake a clutch of talented designers among whose number may be counted Mick Hughes, a confirmed free-lancer in his mid-thirties and Nick Chelton, a confirmed freewheeler in his late twenties. There really wasn't such a thing as a lighting designer until the 1930s, when Davis started to do the job almost as a speciality. Hughes refers to him as 'the grand old man' but remarks upon his per-

ennial excitability, complaining that he was dragged recently from a pub by his hero in order to see and comment upon two of the special effects Davis had provided for *Gypsy*.

While Davis made the theatrical profession aware of the need to take the lighting of shows more seriously, Richard Pilbrow brought the skill into further prominence by the writing of articles, a dedication to the technological improvements of equipment and techniques and, perhaps most importantly of all, the founding of Theatre Projects, an organisation whose ever-mushrooming achievement and ambition spread over every technical aspect of the theatre and now includes in its activities such unlikely functions as the proffering of consultative advice on domestic lighting installation in large secular buildings. The Pilbrow lighting style, in succes-

sion to Joe Davis, embodied the predilection in the 50s and 60s for pale tints to bring out the facial expressions of the actor and to play romantically over colourful, detailed settings of drawing room comedy, big-scale musicals and the classical repertoire. This was the style in which both Hughes and Chelton were steeped in their apprenticeships; both have happy memories of medium blues coming from offstage and through windows to evoke moonlight and Hughes reckons that Pilbrow's own design for the National's *Love For Love* (1965), with its exquisite chiaroscuro on Lila da Nobile's settings was the best job of lighting he's ever seen. Hughes remains more or less in that tradition; Chelton has fallen more under the telling influence of Andy Phillips, whose company takes its name from the Gaskillian, post-Brechtian belief that the best way of visually presenting a play is to make no concessions to sentimental notions of atmospherics, but to reveal, clearly and uncompromisingly, *everything* that goes on on a stage. When Jim Sharman directed *The Unseen Hand* in the Theatre Upstairs last year it was more or less the first time a coloured light had been seen at Sloane Square for eight years.

Nick Chelton has been having an uncommonly busy and successful year. If, at the end of it, he has taken home £2,000 he may consider himself very lucky. He has been appointed Lighting Consultant at the Royal Court and lit there four shows: *The Farm*, *Life Class*, *Bingo* and *The Great Caper*. At Greenwich, where he has a permanent attachment as well, he provided lighting for Jonathan Miller's Oedipal trilogy (*Ghosts*, *The Seagull* and *Hamlet*) and *Marching Song*. Other jobs have included *Cole* at the Mermaid (of which much more later), Alexander Goehr's opera *Arden Must Die* at the Coliseum (Miller again directing), the Alan Ayckbourn trilogy, *Norman Conquests* firstly at Greenwich and subsequently at the Globe, *Waltz of the Toreadors* at the Haymarket, *The Freeway* at the National and, most recently, *Macbeth* for the RSC at Stratford-upon-Avon.

His first loyalty is to Theatre Projects who, ten years ago, gave him his first job and with whom he is still closely involved. 'I was a stage-struck child with the odd distinction of always wanting to be backstage. From as early as I can remember I used to make models of plays and films I'd seen. Knowing that I wasn't good enough with the pencil to be a designer and having been put off the idea of being an actor by my mother who said that actors got pimples on their faces as a result of wearing make-up all day, and reconciled to her theory that you couldn't be a director without having been an actor first, I threw myself into lighting!' With Pilbrow and Theatre Projects he acquired a basic training before going, in 1966, to join John Neville at the Nottingham Playhouse as an electrician. That experience of attending the same theatre every day, every night, for two years he considers his most valuable experience. 'Once a lighting designer, you tend to move from

theatre to theatre and lose that sense of intimate involvement with any one institution's successes and failures.' While working with Theatre Projects, a working relationship with Andy Phillips at the Court was consolidated and good money was to be had by working on fit-ups there and touring the Bond plays, lit by Phillips, on a visit to Eastern Europe.

Mick Hughes is an old mate of Chelton's; they have 'rigged' for each other on innumerable occasions in the past, although social contact is rarer nowadays because both are so busy designing. Hughes's career has been rather more chequered; he has been a camera-tracker at the BBC, a travelling bum in Europe, a heavy at Battersea Funfair, a bus-conductor in Plymouth, and a barman at the Mermaid. This latter job led directly to his first electrician's post with the Margate Stage Company, founded by Sally Miles (Sir Bernard's daughter) and Gerald Frow, then Publicity Officer at Puddle Dock. He was taught and influenced by Tony Caruthers, a gifted stage designer whose increasing disillusion with the theatre has led to virtual anonymity. There followed a stint as Chief Electrician at the Birmingham Rep before joining John B Read for the opening season of the Yvonne Arnaud at Guildford in 1965.

When Read moved to Theatre Projects, Hughes took over and lit everything for the next couple of years. Transfers from Guildford led to West End contacts and between 1966 and 1971, he lit every show at Chichester. At the same time, a hankering to direct was partially satisfied by directing about 40 shows at the Swan

Theatre, Worcester, between 1967 and 1972, but that side of his artistic effort was severely damaged: 'When I went to Worcester I wasn't going there to make a Tory town vote Labour; as a director I felt that, with the right actors, I could make something happen on the stage which was an honest and legitimate experience, not just a corrupt thing of giving people what they think they want. But the audiences didn't respond; it seemed I couldn't even do that. I've never really quite recovered from that.'

Hughes's association with Chichester was renewed this year as he lit all four productions (*The Confederacy*, *Tonight We Improvise*, *Oedipus* and *A Month in the Country*). Recent London work includes *Chez Nous* and, still running, *John George Paul Ringo . . . and Bert* at the Lyric, *Absurd Person Singular* at the Vaudeville, *Why Not Stay For Breakfast?* at the Apollo and *The Taming of the Shrew* at the Shaw. He lit *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1969) for the National, but the RSC and the Royal Court have never entered his orbit. Like so many spheres of the backstage theatrical professions, lighting design operates very much on a level of whom you know at a particular point in time. 'I do more for Michael Codron than anybody else; I like and respect him. There's a lot of waste in the subsidised companies, a fact of which I'm very aware after my experience at Worcester where our grant was minimally adjusted as the National's was increased by huge amounts year in, year out.' The immediate future offers him a joint role of director/lighting designer on *Dr Who*, a Christmas show based on

Mick Hughes is lighting designer for John Paul George Ringo . . . and Bert at the Lyric
Photograph John Haynes



the popular BBC TV series for which the producers were anxious to recruit a director of notable technical competence.

The actual business of being a lighting designer is difficult to convey in print or describe in pictures, so ephemeral is the duty and so poor is most theatrical photography. Although a designer will attend production conferences in advance of the rehearsal stage, his job cannot really begin until the show gets into the theatre itself, and usually that is a matter of days before the opening night. The writer has a script, the set designer has a model, the actors have a few weeks of rehearsal. Chelton is very aware of the feeling of lounging around at rehearsals as the director sizes him up and concludes 'that fellow doesn't have a clue of what I'm talking about'. Chelton elaborates on the problem: 'Just at the moment when the director gets to the theatre, after rehearsals, and is wishing that he'd never got involved in the production in the first place, that's when he's going to sit there and watch you, in the darkness of the auditorium and at the dead of night, try and put, rather tortuously, some light on the bloody thing. At that point the job is really one of trying to be helpful to the director as much

as of trying to manipulate him to your proposals while he manipulates you to his. It's very difficult to give a director confidence at that time, because he's worried about a million and one things besides your wretched lighting plot. It took me years to develop a personality capable of dealing with all that and coming through it relatively unscathed.'

Difficulties are not confined to the nature of the job; Hughes's period at Chichester was not only one of coming to grips with a very tricky thrust stage set-up, but also of coping with the blinkered outlook of traditionally-minded directors. The last play of the 1966 season was *Macbeth*, directed by Michael Benthall with John Clements in the title role. 'There were quite a few fights over the technical presentation of the play; traditional directors tend, in that theatre, to treat the two downstage corners as though they belong to a proscenium arch theatre. Well, obviously, you can extend that and say that the downstage corner to the opposite up-stage corner on each side is another proscenium; so, in a thrust situation, you're dealing with three proscenium openings. I felt, strongly, that we *had* to light for the people at the side as well as the front, and

so eventually found myself lighting the same show, in effect, four times over.'

The Royal Court in the Gaskill era was famous for its team of stage staff and electricians led by Andy Phillips. In terms of British production, many of the things going on there were extraordinary in technical terms alone; and Gaskill and his fellow directors, who were not necessarily technically minded, very much backed the work of Phillips and the electricians. Chelton remembers being particularly impressed with the idea of a whole lighting rig being flown in for certain scenes so that the lights became a structural part of the set. 'The work of Peter Gill was important in this respect, but I remember especially Anthony Page's production of *Uncle Vanya* (Paul Scofield in the lead) in 1970. The important thing is to use the technician as someone you trust, and that doesn't happen nearly enough. Very few theatres have caught up with that Court idea of a theatre where technicians are expected, and may be trusted, to get on with the job they are paid to do. There, they expect you to do anything. The great thing that Andy Phillips taught me was that equipment is not an end in itself, that there is nothing you ought not to be able to do with equipment, like take it all down and put it all up again if things aren't working out right. I learnt from him a total disregard for the sort of problems that orientate from outside what, artistically, you're trying to do.'

Both Chelton and Hughes place great store by the forging of loyalties and the value of working with people they know and like. Ironically enough, Hughes worked with director Eric Thompson and designer Alan Tagg on the two Ayckbourn comedies preceding *The Norman Conquests* and was a little upset to find that, as those latter plays were first presented at Greenwich, Chelton replaced him on the production team! Apart from Alan Tagg, another designer with whom Hughes has had a notable association is Brian Curragh, but as he operates more or less exclusively in the commercial sector, he is regretfully conscious of the fact that lots of creative relationships are destroyed by managements, not out of malice, but because of *their* loyalties to the individuals they prefer to use whatever the product. Hughes feels closest, probably, to his current production electrician. They have worked together for only a couple of years, but if you go through a few nights with a workmate you soon find yourself cast as godfather to his children; and that is precisely what has happened. There is an extraordinary fraternity among the lighting boys which is at once unhealthily clannish (professional jealousy is as rampant as in the actors' ranks) and compulsively gregarious. 'Lighting boys are always boozers' says Hughes, it's 'impossible to avoid it; because everywhere you work you're working with a new bunch of electricians, and the first thing you do when you have a break is to go over the road and get to know each other over a jar or two. Or three!'

A good lighting job rarely receives ac-

Angela Richards in *Cole*, which nearly failed to open on time at the Mermaid

Photograph Anthony Crickmay



knowledge from the critics. Hughes claims to have received some fantastic reviews for terrible lighting, but knows full well that what he considers a good job will be seen to be such by his fellow professionals. 'I'm perfectly happy with that. I know in myself, for instance, that for *Chez Nous* I produced a first-rate piece of lighting. It was good because it made every contribution that I think a job of lighting could have made to that play; you could see everything, and the scene in the barn was, eventually, very satisfying. You know how when you walk into a barn from outside daylight, the light is always a little disconcerting it suddenly feels a little darker and colder. I think I got that. *John, Paul, Ringo, George . . . and Bert* on the other hand was a really scrambled, just adequate piece of work due to a series of insurmountable technical hitches in the preview period. I'm not really very pleased with that.'

An insight into the occasionally hair-raising world of technical operations in the theatre could not possibly be out-done by Chelton's account of getting *Cole* at the Mermaid up on time for the first preview on a Wednesday night. 'We started on the Saturday. The Mermaid had, very boldly and quite understandably, tried to install, a few months previously, a moderately-priced computerised operating board. It had not, to date, been a success; when I came in to do a very complicated and difficult show they were still being promised that it would work by the time I started to light. Now, frankly, I think computerised boards are a pain in the arse. Only once, just recently at Stratford, have I enjoyed working with one. The trouble is that, if you've got a sequence of cues and you want to change one of them, then you've got to change 7 or 10 perhaps in a row; and that's very boring both for you and the director who's sitting there wanting to get on. Well this Mermaid board really didn't work, but we actually lit the whole of *Cole* on the board before discovering that we would have to operate it manually throughout. This was, patently, a farce; there are, in *Cole*, about five cues before the audience even sits down! We worked late into the night, hoping the board would suddenly work and then, in the early hours of the Tuesday, when it obviously wasn't going to, I advised the management that something drastic ought to be done.

I decided, with their backing, that we would have to by-pass that board completely and install another. I managed to get hold of about eight electricians that morning (mostly from the Court, as it happened); they arrived very fast and I managed to get into the theatre two ordinary and rather disjointed boards. We ripped a room apart at the Mermaid and installed them. I went away while the lads fitted up those boards, which took from around noon until about 8 am on the Wednesday—the job also involved re-wiring the rig quite extensively. At about 10 on the Tuesday night, when we passed the point where we thought this might just work, I went back to my office with



Round and Round the Garden is one of the *Ayckbourn* trilogy, lit up at the *Globe* by Chelton

Photograph Stephen Moreton Prichard

my assistant and sellotaped a big chart to the window. On that chart we put a code of what were the old circuit numbers and what would become the new circuit numbers (the circuit had to be entirely re-plugged and reconstructed). This system meant we had to have three switchboards, so we sat down with three piles of paper and plodded through the whole show, re-writing the plot. We finished at 7am and returned to the theatre with very little faith that it would work. We gave the plots to the operators, went through the show and, incredibly, it did. The first preview went ahead, as scheduled, that Wednesday night.' Chelton was fortunate in having, in Alan Strachan and Peter Docherty, an understanding and patient director and designer who were prepared to sit, watch and wait until the job was done.

Both he and Hughes talk in glowing terms of their respective creative relationships with Lindsay Anderson. Hughes remembers that the biggest scope he had in his Chichester period was while lighting Anderson's production of *The Cherry Orchard* (1966). 'He had a direction of his own, but was somehow able to sustain a clear requirement from me while, at the same time, admitting that he wasn't very familiar with the thrust stage situation. If he saw something he liked, whether it was there by accident or design, he'd recognise it, take it and make you develop it from there.' Chelton lit *The Farm* last September and relished the detailed approach of Anderson to his work. 'It's a good laugh, too, because he insults you and upsets you and makes things a little difficult; but he does have this *great* ability to get the very best out of people. We're all, in any theatre, a little lethargic, I think; we prefer to do the cushy job. Anderson comes into the Court like a bat out of hell and that place really sits up and takes notice. A lot of people complain about it, but *nothing* ends up wrong on his productions. I like that.'

Both designers would be content to let the technological advances in lighting

mark time for a bit; both see the advent of the computerised board as a dangerous threat to the unique contribution that may be made by a board operator with a real eye for lighting design, a sensitive feel for the shading in and out of a lighting 'state' in response to a particular moment that evening in the theatre. Hughes considers that the board that went into the Old Vic several years ago is perfectly adequate for any conceivable lighting job and infinitely preferable to any computerised substitute.

A lighting designer rarely changes his trade. Once established, he can either carry on for ever (like Joe Davis) or, and this is unusual, branch out into production or big business in the manner of Richard Pilbrow. Chelton is understandably concerned about his future livelihood, fearing that unless there is a ruthless paring down of theatre in this country over the next five years we may well be left with no theatre at all. 'I think that a theatre like Greenwich is a real lesson to us all; it's a good size, just like an empty shell. That's what theatres should be, empty shells. I think if the new National had just one auditorium the size of Greenwich it would promise to be a much better place. The trouble with the large subsidised companies is that they are throwing up a whole new breed of theatrical bureaucrats who are dying to get their suits on and stand up and pontificate for £5,000 per year. The major companies are heading, unavoidably in my view, for an impossible union situation with their staffs who see their work conditions taking second place to those of hordes of secretaries and admin bods. The more of those there are, the more difficult it seems to be to get anything done. I'm not saying that the staffs at the National or RSC are truculent, yet; they're not, they're bloody wonderful. It's the general management planning that is awful; I very much suspect the new breed of people who work from offices all the time. The new National probably excites all sorts of technicians who believe in technicalities as an end in themselves. I'm really not interested in that.'