



2013 NATIONAL STAGE MANAGEMENT CONFERENCE

Breakout sessions: STAGE ELECTRICS

Darren Beckley (Sales Mgr) and Richard Thompson – (Operations Mgr, Manufacturing) gave us two sessions in the day. The first was in competition with a very popular session on Life/Work balance, so only had about 15, but the afternoon was quite busy.

They came with an iPad-sourced, iPhone-cued presentation and three portable examples of their desks. (The technology worked pretty perfectly)

We got a potted history of the company and its pedigree of constructing SM desks alongside their core activities in Audio/Video/ Scenic and Project management. Over the last 21 years they have built over 100 desks, the equipment advancing with technology and consultation.

- From no screens to multiple LCD screens integrated in the design.
- From GPO switches (very popular), through rocker switches (very unpopular), to programmable, push-button switches (still subject to debate).
- From neatly integrated internal wiring that required a service engineer to fix, to modular systems using industry-standard cabling and connectors for ease of swapping or upgrading.

They are regularly in conversations with theatre consultants about installations in new buildings. Lighting Designers have their say, Sound Designers have their say, Architectural Consultants make their specifications – but Stage Managers are never part of the discussion.

Recently at Guildhall they went through a work shopping process to design up with three bespoke desks suitable to the needs of the building and the course – but this is a rare occurrence.

For the Lir in Dublin they designed a system that could make use of the common cabling infrastructure – to cut down on cost.

They have a very simple portable cueing system for hire that is proving very popular. The buttons can be programmed in many different ways – and memorised for different SM's preferences.

Stage Electrics' purpose in attending this Conference was to continue and improve their dialogue with SMs about what we need in a desk.

This is where it got interesting.

No one knows why the script shelf is at the slope it is – no-one has asked to change it.

Some people don't like having to reach over the script to press buttons – could they be up the side? (Some people are left-handed)

Many don't like tiny buttons. There is a whole debate about whether the standby light should be red or orange – though none of us present could understand why orange. And no-one manufactures GPO buttons anymore – so get over it!

The standard height of desks was discussed – and the general ergonomics. The importance of the chair in relation to the desk was discussed – but SE don't make chairs and bar-stools are not considered a good idea (in a prompt corner anyhow).

Discussed how aurally-impaired SMs could use two-way camera systems and lights instead of comms.

Discussed the need for a side shelf for the laptop running Q_Lab beside the script.

Discussed whether computerisation and wireless would help – the general feeling was one of distrust of computers and wireless (though personally I think we need to get over that too!)

From SE's point of view cost is a big factor. If they can use standard parts from other industries – they can make affordable desks. Computers and wireless do bump up the cost.

The general outcome of opinion was that each SM might have their own preferred layout, and that would change according to the needs of a show – so modular design is probably the way forward for SE.

One huge problem is that the majority of venues have old and unsuitable equipment – and the SM has to put up with whatever is there. Even custom-installed West-End shows force some DSMs to call cues sitting on the edge of a box, or to move the entire unit into the corridor for a scene change.

The real problem is that SMs get no say, and feel they cannot object to whatever is put in front of them.

Personal conclusions -

The continuing dialogue initiated by Stage Electrics, through hands-on demos at their home-base, PLASA and now the NSMC, and their willingness to represent our voice in discussions with consultants – is a tremendous leap forward.

SMs need to be aware that we have friends out there, willing to help and discuss. SMs also need to step up and speak out for proper working conditions and suitable equipment to keep the multi-million pound industry going.

“Make do and mend” is still a laudable maxim, but not at the risk of back strain, eyestrain, neck-ache and ear-ache.