

Into the Twenty-first century via Lock-down.

Soon after the end of the War, my mother gave me a Pollocks Regency Toy Theatre for Christmas. It came in a bright red box, and contained the scenery and characters for 'Aladdin'. By Christmas day afternoon the coloured paper sheet had been stuck on the Bakelite proscenium, and the plywood stage floor and wooden frame bolted together. By St. Stephen's Day the characters had been cut out, and rehearsals began for the first performance which took place the day after. 'Aladdin' was followed by a performance of 'The Merry Widow' because it had been produced by the local operatic society that year, and I had a crush on the leading lady. My production featured home-drawn characters and scenery, and music supplied from an 'Easy-to-Play' book of arrangements of the main tunes from the operetta. Action on the stage halted for the music when the Impresario/Producer/Stage Manager/Conductor/Orchestra (me) rushed to the piano and sang all parts from Bass-Baritone to Soprano in a choirboy treble.

Slightly later, at the local Wesleyan Sunday School, a performance of the Laurence Olivier film version of Hamlet was given, with its atmospheric monochrome scenery and coloured characters. This was approved of by Mr. Andrews, the Sunday School Superintendent, who considered that Shakespeare (suitably edited and bowdlerised) was 'improving'. 'The Massacre of Penny Plain' was less approved of by him, though more popular with the audience. 'The Silver Palace', was not so popular, although it was highly spectacular, with a real water fountain constructed from a glass tube, bent over the gas stove, which siphoned water from a bowl precariously balanced on top of the theatre, creating a small jet of water which was then collected in a bowl with a tube to a bucket under the table. The fountain just lasted for the length of the final scene. By now, sweet rationing had ended, and that Christmas, (was it Coronation Year?) my Aunt Florrie gave me a tin of Quality Street, with all the sweets wrapped in variously coloured cellophane. My other Aunt, Dorothy, gave me a small hand torch, and it soon occurred to me that by covering the torch with the sweet wrappings, lighting effects could be added to the repertoire. As we still had gas lighting at home at this time, this was the height of modernity! The interior of the 'Cock Inn' in J. B. Priestley's 'The High Toby' (with scenery and characters by Doris Zinkeisen) was most effectively lit with the amber yellow cellophane from the toffees. The play was, however, so long and wordy, that it was a real struggle to make an effective production, and performances had to be given of the three separate acts on successive evenings, and the long-suffering audience reminded each time what had happened in the previous acts.

About this time, Pollocks produced a lighting set, and I managed to persuade my mother to buy this for me for my birthday. And oh the thrill of a brilliantly lit stage, and the three coloured strips of gelatine in red, blue, and green, which could be slotted into the overhead batten which supplemented Aunt Dorothy's hand torch. That was now promoted to the role of following spot. At one time Pollocks did offer a real adjustable spot-light, which I wrote to enquire about, but it cost seven and sixpence, and that was far beyond my means. I still have Marguerite Fawdry's letter, addressed 'Dear Master Francis Burroughes'.

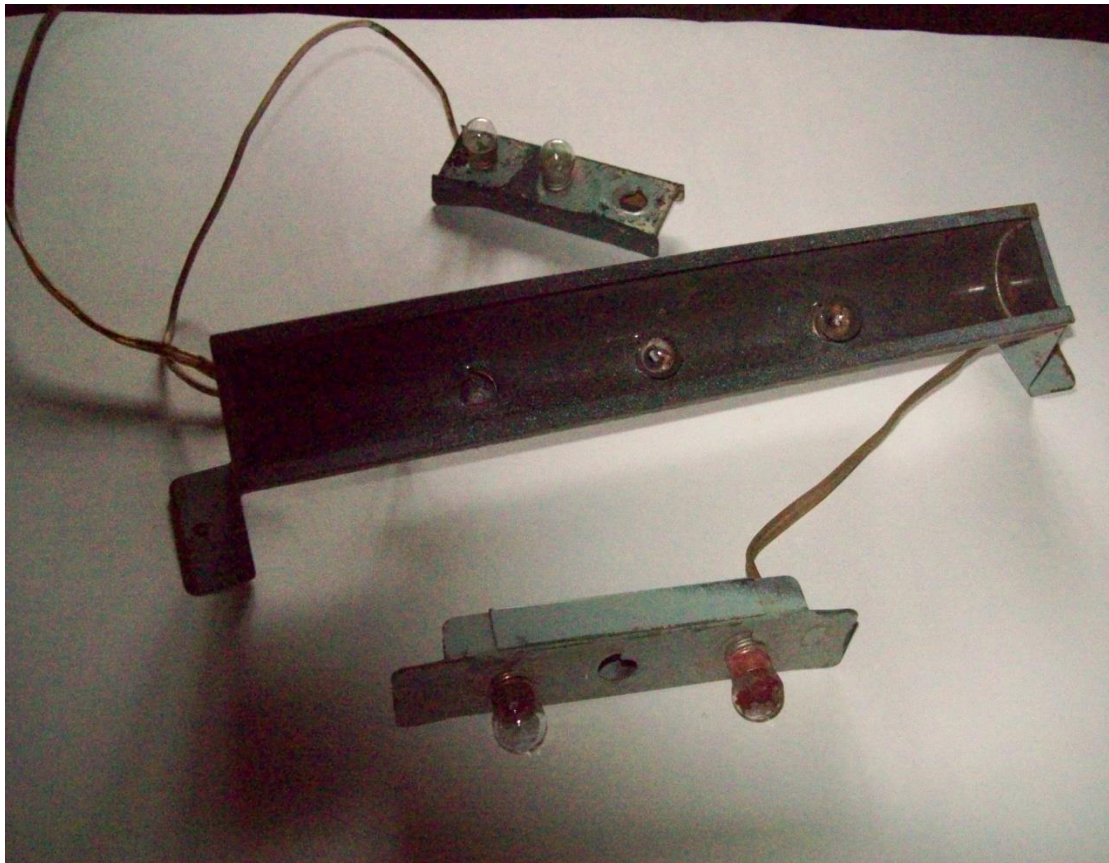
But I then discovered that it was possible to buy, for sixpence each, bulb holders, which I wired in parallel, screwed to wooden battens, and added to the lighting. The bill for 3.5 volt

torch bulbs and 4.5 volt Eveready Bell batteries, with their brass terminals and threaded nuts started to go through the roof. In the meantime, as the number of battens increased, and the consumption of Quality Street allowed more subtle colours, the lighting plots became ever more complex, so switchboards became essential. At this time we at last had electricity in the house, and the electrician very kindly gave me some old round-pin two amp plugs and sockets, and for many years these, in various configurations, were my principal means of control. Experimental dimmers were created out of jam jars filled with salted water, with terminals moved closer together or further apart by means of a winch made from Meccano, or else using bars from electric fires as rheostats, and later, as they became cheaper, auxiliary controllers designed for model railways allowed even more effects.

Later still, torch bulbs were replaced, first by 12 volt Christmas Tree lights, then coloured LED lights, and a cigar box, given to me many years earlier, formed my new switchboard, with rotary rheostats and circuit switches. The cigar box had the great advantage of hiding the intricate and admittedly untidy wiring. And I really thought that the twenty-first century had arrived. However, the period of lock-down led me to think that perhaps I was not as up-to-date as I thought, and after some consideration, I got round to replacing the lot with strip LED lights, with infra-red wireless remote control, giving me 256 colour combinations in varying intensities, all programmable and run from the computer which provides the sound track for the various operas and operettas which still form my repertoire. But like most Model Theatre enthusiasts, I have a large box containing all those bits and pieces which I never throw away, because they might come in useful one day; odds and ends of Meccano, my original Regency Theatre lighting set, 3.5 volt screw-in torch bulbs and spare bulb holders. But it is years since I have seen a 4.5 volt Eveready Bell Battery in the shops.



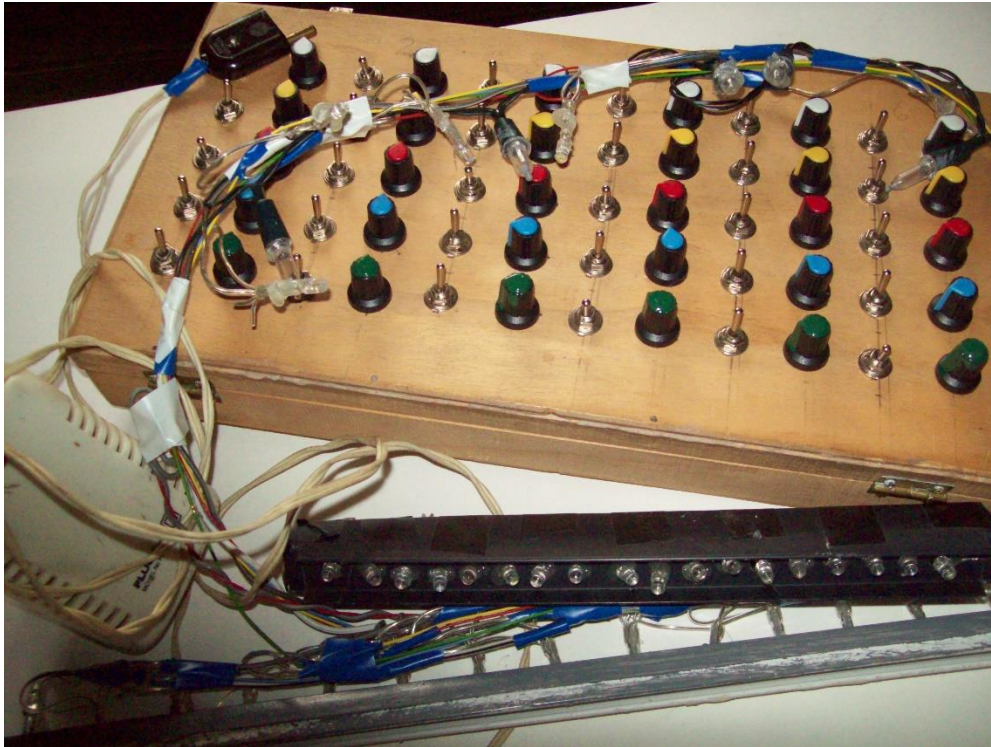
I see that my power supply cost 1/3d. (Six and a quarter new pence for those of you using this new-fangled decimal coinage.) This was a major drain on my limited pocket money.



Batten and Footlights from Pollocks lighting set. Traces of poster paint can still be seen on the bulbs, to act as a 'curtain warmer'.



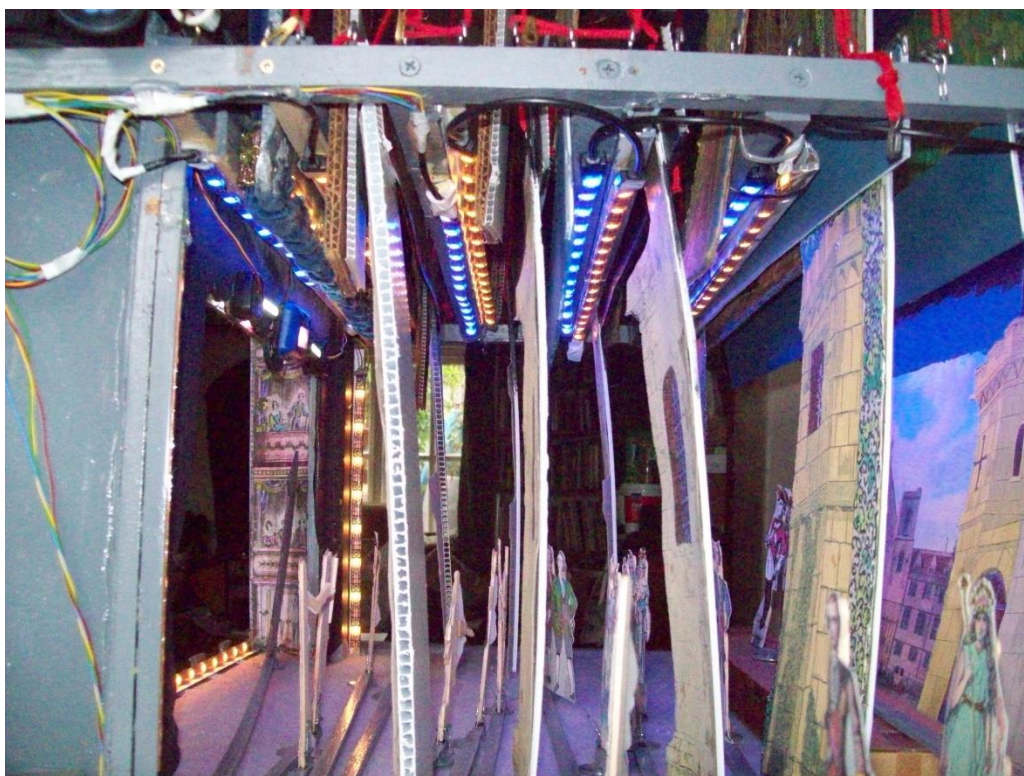
The twentieth century and electricity arrives, so no more dependence on Eveready Bell batteries!



Into the twenty-first century with first of all miniature Christmas lights, and then with LEDs. Thirty circuits under individual control seemed to me in my innocence to be the ultimate in sophistication.



Self-adhesive strip of LEDs, Infra-red reader, programmable controller, and wireless computer connection, all taking less space than an Eveready Bell battery. Unfortunately, it is not six and a quarter new pence, although comparatively, it is not that much more expensive.



A glimpse back-stage during the Finale of Act II of 'Iolanthe'.



And a view from 'Front of House' of the same scene.