

## Remembering the NCP SOTs

My first venture into the world of acting came at an early age, starring as one of the two babes in the pantomime *Babes in the Wood* directed by Charles Ollington at the National Theatre. I was disappointed not to have my own dressing room, and was forced to share with the Tinker, the Tailor and the Candlestick Maker. All went well until my dressing room mates decided to share a crate of Tusker with me during the interval. The result was predictable, and the Stage Manager (Sheila Ollington) was not amused! After being dunked several times in cold water, and being forced to drink strong black coffee, I tottered onto the stage for the second Act. Fortunately, the first scene opens with the babes asleep on a pile of leaves in the woods – which I performed to great acclaim! Needless to say, my acting career failed to shine thereafter, so I instead found my niche working backstage with the **Stage Operators and Technical Specialists (SOTs)**, set up by Mac Spence.

It was a wonderful experience. I started by assisting with set construction – first painting, and then when I could be trusted with a saw and power tools, actually helping to build sets. All scenery was built and stored in the workshops adjacent to the stage in the National Theatre.

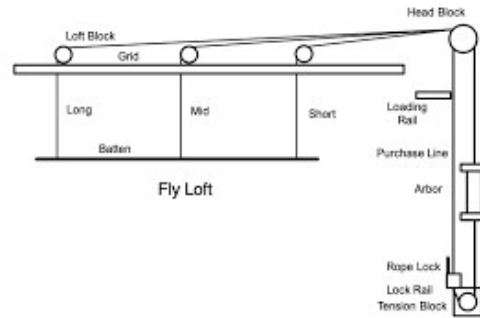
Before curtain up, I trotted around the changing rooms with the 15/10/5 minute calls. During shows, I was delegated to help set and strike sets, and became efficient in the quick scene changes. I helped with the sound effects – no computers in those days. We had a door bell chime, a wind machine, and made thunderclap noises with a sheet of metal.



Typical wind machine

The best sound effect was firing a real machine gun, loaded with blanks, offstage during *Ross*!

Later I graduated to assisting in the “flies”, flying all sorts of heavily counter-balanced scenery in and out of the set by pulling on various ropes and cables.



Typical Fly Loft System

It was great fun, as long as you remembered to slow down as you approached the mark to avoid hitting the stage with a large thump!

Mac Spence duly promoted me to the position of **Follow Spot Operator**. There were two large manoeuvrable spots in the National Theatre, one on each side of the Proscenium Arch, at the top of the tower.



This job was initially fun, but became quite boring after a while as there were long periods when no follow spot was required. To help pass the time, I invited my girlfriend Sally to climb up the ladder and assist during the show, which she duly did.

Unfortunately, as we were otherwise engaged, I missed several follow-spot cues, and was fired as **Follow Spot Operator!**

Eventually, I was forgiven and was allowed to assist in the lighting box. No fancy computers in those days – only huge levers to fade the lights in and out!



Typical Lighting Control System

This was by far the most interesting of the SOTs roles, and I would have liked to learn more about lighting sets. Unfortunately, I had to leave Kenya in order to complete my secondary education in the UK, and never had the chance.

Other backstage crew included the Stage Manager, Assistant Stage Manager, Props Manager, prompt, dressers for quick changes, and sometimes the Costume Designer having a quick peak at the action!

During my later life, I became involved with the theatre in various parts of the world where I was living and working. I helped to convert a Methodist Church into the Ryde Theatre on the Isle of Wight and built sets for the Stage Club in Singapore, etc. On retiring, we moved to our house in Jávea Spain, where I joined the Jávea Players, and was able to re-engage with the world of amateur dramatics. This group has allowed me to stage manage several of their shows, design sets, and generally help run the group, all of which I enjoy. My early days with the Nairobi City Players SOTs provided excellent training!

**Hugh Epsom**