

read more...

Continued from November 2009 CTI Newsletter

## What's It Like To Work In One Of The World's Greatest Theatres?

If you are familiar with London's National Theatre, you know what an amazing place it is. If you are not familiar with it, please take some time to do a little research either before or after you read our interview with Paul McLeish. To learn more about the National Theatre, visit their [website](#) and take a [virtual tour](#). The National's website is excellent and on it you can tour the entire theatre department by department. It is well worth watching. I spent hours virtually poking around the lighting shops and backstage corridors.

Paul McLeish has been at London's Royal National Theatre for nearly 35 years. We got a chance to ask him some questions about the theatres there and about his career.

**CTI:** How long have you been at The Royal National Theater and what are your responsibilities there?

**Paul McLeish:** 35 years this September. With responsibilities for the Olivier lighting department and all lighting infrastructure in the Olivier theatre, a total of nine people plus two long term Sunday covers. That breaks down to me, one supervisor dep'ing for me and putting on shows. One programmer in charge of networking and programming in the Olivier. One show supervisor, also taking turns putting on new productions. The rest being multi skilled technicians taking on all tasks put in front of them

**CTI:** How did you get started in technical theatre and where did you get your training?

**Paul McLeish:** I was a tea boy after school in the making costume dept. at the Old Vic theatre before the National Theatre moved to its permanent home on the south bank.

When I came up to leaving school I asked Donald Macintosh who was the production manager if he could get me a job. He asked me what I would like to do. I thought that carpentry might be good, so he set me up with a job. However three days later Donald came back to say that because I wasn't in the union the job had fallen through. (In those days you couldn't get in the union unless you had a job and you couldn't get a job unless you were in the union) So plan B: what else would I like to do? My dad had been an electrician so I suggested that. Donald call Lennie Tucker the Chief Electrician over, I had an interview and it was decided that Len would take me on as a showman, and that I would do a 2 year one day a week course with the ABTT to get me an electrical/ theatre lighting qualification. So, even though I had a run in with the chief steward as I attempted to do something on stage for the first time, because I was training and not being paid in the daytime I was allowed to stay.

The rest of my training has been working and learning from some quite talented people that have passed through the lighting dept. and some of the best lighting designers in the world.

**CTI:** Um... what's a tea boy?

**Paul McLeish:** Haha. My official title was General Factotum. Some sort of Latin name. It means do anything. But I was actually a tea boy. After school I would come along and make tea for people in the costume production department. I had people like Vincent Price and Diana Rigg on my tea list which I was quite proud of. I would do anything. I would collect things and check shoes that were fixed in town. I had a little motor bike and a push bike when I was in school, and the motor bike when I was sixteen. I would run around doing errands. I would also literally make tea too.

It was different then. There aren't tea boys now, certainly at the National, but then there was a need for and a budget for someone to make tea.

**CTI:** What is your yearly schedule like? Are you open and busy all year?

**Paul McLeish:** We have recently started our second season of Sunday opening. This "season" doesn't have an end date. So we are now a seven day a week organisation. We play 9 shows a week with a matinee mid-week and Saturday.

This causes problems for access and maintenance. Luckily the Olivier has just had a dark week so we took the opportunity to re-gel our colour scrollers and take down and service our 110 moving lights, clean / pat test our generic rig and renumber our rig as we are installing new dimmers.

**CTI:** How often do you have to incorporate a new show into rep? Describe that process.

**Paul McLeish:** New shows come into our rep about every 6 weeks. We get involved several weeks before the tech starts on stage. We are normally working on the next production while we are in tech with the previous one. We have to talk through any extra needs, such as star cloths, set lighting, moving light hires, dry ice, extra crew, follow spots, and agree cost/budgets. Agree staffing levels and find and contract extra staff if necessary.

Schedules have to be done with plenty of negotiating over priorities but generally we get about five sessions for lighting that's a day for focusing and about half a day for lighting. Building groups and creating lighting states.

As a producing/making dept we will be involved with wiring up the sets with anything required from LED lighting under the sets to give a floating glow that can change colour to festoons or twinkling stars.

**CTI:** What is your role when a show is in the theatre?

**Paul McLeish:** My role is to be responsible for making sure that all the right people are there in the right places at the right time with the right equipment that is working as it should be and that everybody is as happy as they can be, from lighting designers, to stage management, to actors, to "the management" up on the fourth floor and that all the risk assessments have been done, time sheets are processed that I haven't missed any meetings and that the minutes from the previous meetings have at least got a good excuse as to why they haven't been done.

**CTI:** Tell me more about the crew that you have working with you.

**Paul McLeish:** First of all there is Mark Williams who is the supervisor. He is my deputy. He has responsibilities for dep'ing for me but also putting on new productions. When I'm not here or doing something out of the building he will dep for me and takes responsibilities for half of the shows we put in as a sort of Production Spark. Let me go next to Andy Turner. He's our senior lighting technician. He has responsibility for putting on shows as well, but without the dep'ing for me bit. He's just done *Nation*. He is responsible from conception, to the show going out and being dumped onto a wagon. He will look after it the whole time and produce it. He is there to manage the show budget and help manage the staff. He will liaise strongly with me to schedule the right people in the right time to construct the production and pre rig the production and just go thru the technical period making sure we've got the right people in, and try to give days off when possible. We work a system of two days off a week if possible.

The other person who is quite important is John McGarrigle. He is the only programmer of big shows in the Olivier at the moment because of having gotten the EOS in relatively recently. We've lost a few people that



Paul McLeish on the set of the new show *Nation*.



VL500s and VL1000s at the Olivier



The Olivier lighting crew (l-r) Ben Dodds, Lighting Technician; Mark Williams, Lighting Technician; John McGarrigle, Senior Programming Technician; C Technician; and Paul McLeish, Lighting Operational Manager



Paul at the lighting desk with the plot

initially trained on it. We've managed to get Tom Snell and John trained up and they are both brilliant on it now. Tom had to go transfer to the Lyttleton because they didn't have a programmer. So we have John McGarrigle as our main front runner on the programming and he does all our main shows at the moment. We have a couple of people coming up. Daniel Hagerty who is programming by nature is good and is trained on the EOS and Ben Dodds who learned the desk too. John also looks after networking and WDS and dimmer patching and the sort.

After that we've got Richards Bradshaw, Ben Dodds, Daniel Hagerty and Cat Silver. They are all technicians and they multi task and do anything and everything. That's all of us in fact. Anybody can find themselves on follow spot or operating the board during the show or doing stage cues. We have a few other people who are extra short term contract people who just help because we are doing Sundays now and we are in technical rehearsal. That's the crew, eight full time people with four extra people, one on the tour two for Sundays and one for extra follow spots. We flutter in relation to how many shows need or touring. Eight is the full time people, two are long term for Sunday and one for tour and one for follow spot.

**CTI:** You said someone would act as a Production Spark. That's not a term we use here. Please explain.

**Paul McLeish:** A Production Spark is someone who is responsible for putting on the show, lighting wise. They are people who are called in to put on shows in the West End by the Lighting Designer. They'd be responsible for hiring in the rig, hiring in the truss, hiring in the crew. They do the pre-production work; wire in the set, doing everything needed to put the show on. We have that at the National because we are a production department and so we have the same process as the West End for putting on the show, but we do it in a shorter amount of time.

**CTI:** RNT is one of the top theatre institutions in the world. What is the staff like, how long do they stay around?

**Paul McLeish:** Well, it is difficult to leave because we are at the top of the rung as it were. There are some people here who have been here as long as I have. There is one person who has been here for slightly longer. There was a tendency for people not to leave. But there are people like Steve Wentworth who does ModelBox. There is the guy who did the video design on Nation now, John Driscoll, he's come back and does video design. There is Alan Jacoby who owns Unusual Rigging. He came from the Olivier Lighting department, as did Steve and John. They go off and are quite successful people out there. There is a person running a guest house in Cornwall. Some people die, of course, over time. The Chief Electrician in the Lyttleton and the Olivier both died. After 35 years, you can lose people. They are off doing stuff. It is hard to find a job of equal status.

**CTI:** Is your current staff a fairly young staff?

**Paul McLeish:** Yes, all of them are in their twenties with the exception of one follow spot operator. It makes me feel old especially coming from a starting age of 16 when I was always the youngest one. I think the change came with moving lights. I remember PAR cans coming in, that was a big change. A memory desk was a big thing. The biggest change was technology and now we have 110 moving lights. Most lighting designers use the moving lights. They fit in with our generics, they use our 5Ks with scrollers, but they all use the Moving Lights. Therefore it is a technology thing now, where it used to be a generic we needed to go focus. It is two different worlds, one that I used to be in and the one that I am in now. Technology is the difference and it is a big big thing, and it is a young person's game.

**CTI:** What it is like to work with all of the famous and talented people that work at the National?

**Paul McLeish:** It is a real privilege to work with them actually. I find myself learning all the time from the quite stunning, amazing people. Lighting designers come in and do things, you think, Ah that's great. You've got new ideas coming in all the time from these talented people. The directors, it is a very mixed bunch of directors. You see the different methods of doing things. Nick Hytner has to have the show ready before it comes on stage for tech, whereas some people are still developing it. It is a wide range of experiences. These are all quite stunning people to work with. You have Alan Bennett sitting behind you at the production desk. You find yourself chatting to other authors, like Harold Pinter; people that are just famous legends who are here at the national putting on shows. It's a real privilege.

Arthur Miller came on stage. I stood on stage with him and explained what the lights were doing as the question and answer session started. This was Arthur Miller; he was married to Marilyn Monroe and the McCarthy trials and everything. I was so honored. Sometimes these people just appear. When I first started I was follow spotting Lawrence Olivier, the only time he performed on the Olivier stage for some opening gala and I follow spotted him. I thought this is such a privilege so I feel privileged to meet these people and work with them. They are legends, what people talk and read about, and they just appear. It is a real privilege.

**CTI:** Do you have any advice for young technicians trying to get their careers started?

**Paul McLeish:** Well I see so many students and they all request to come in for work experience. There are so many, but the industry isn't that big. When I talk to other people within the industry, we are all saying the same thing. The industry isn't big enough to cope with the amount of colleges who are producing technicians who are entering the industry, particularly qualified lighting designers. That is great that they have a qualification in lighting design because it is a good grounding, but I don't believe that there are that many jobs in this industry. We only have 35 theatres in London. There are not that many jobs in relation.

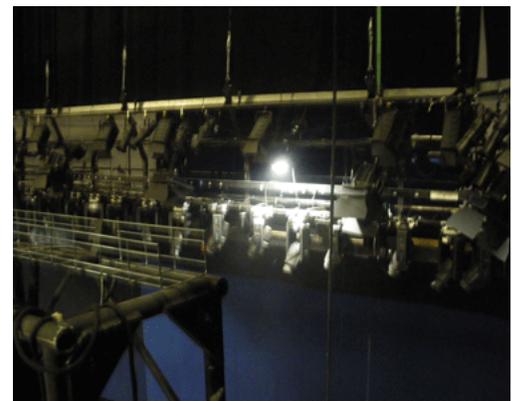
It's not something you want to make a career of because there are long and unsocial hours. People outside theatre never believe that. They don't believe that you can work 9AM to 11PM all day all week because you are putting on a new show. People don't do that outside theatre. It is a very difficult thing to do as a career and so I say to people that if they can, do something else as well, so they have a choice. I think that is a very good thing to have. So that when they get to be 35 and think I'm not sure about this and your family is missing you. That is my point. I know it is a negative one. The positives are the fact that you get to meet amazing people. It is a creative career where you are doing amazing creative things. Lighting design is the cream on the top of the milk where you are painting pictures with light and it is the most enjoyable thing. You get to travel a lot. I've been to Moscow, Israel, Tokyo, all around America. It is great. Most jobs you never go abroad with. There are certainly pluses to what can happen. But if you are planning on getting married and having a family life, it is difficult as you get older. So I think it's best to have a safety net, to have an option or a "get out" clause.



ETC Eos in the lighting booth



The prompt corner at the Olivier Theatre



Lighting bridges overhead contain distributed IES dimmers



New IES dimmers being installed