



## A Changing Light

White Light Ltd marked 40 years of business in November. Lee Baldock visited the company's Wimbledon base and talked to managing director Bryan Raven about the White Light of today and its broadening operation, its strategy for growth, its links with education and what's on the horizon for 2012...

When John Simpson founded White Light Ltd on 18 November 1971 - along with partners Andy Phillips, Rory Dempster, David Henderson and Angela Fox - I was five days old, wrapped up warm and probably asleep, a few miles south-east of London's theatreland. Forty years later to the very week, White Light's managing director Bryan Raven and I are sitting in his office discussing the company over a shared birthday cake.

"The West End is about 8% of our turnover now," Raven had revealed to me a few weeks earlier, when we met at Creative Technology's 25th anniversary party in Soho. Despite what I know of the rapid growth of White Light's sales operation and of its increasing project work both in the UK and overseas, this fact still comes as something of a surprise, so fixed is the perceived link between White Light and the West End.

Although the UK theatre lighting rental market remains very significant for White Light, it is gradually becoming a smaller part of a much larger, more varied whole. "Theatre has been reasonably static for four or five years now," says Raven. "There are 34 commercial theatres in the West End, and around 50 commercial receiving houses around the country, and that's it."

He adds: "Our market share in West End theatre is around 60 or 70 percent. I don't think it's healthy - either for us or for the market - for us to have any more than that."

This shift, very much by design, has taken place over many years: a balanced spread of theatre, corporate events and installation work gives a far safer footing than can be offered by the erratic world of theatre alone: "We never want to be in a position again where theatre is 80% of our business," says Raven. "That could be scary at times."

Left: John Simpson and Bryan Raven celebrate 40 years of White Light during the PLASA Show 2011 at Earls Court.

Facing page: A view of part of the company's extensive warehouse facilities in Wimbledon.



Left: The White Light board of directors, L-R - Managing director Bryan Raven, operations director Chris Nicholls, chairman John Simpson, finance director Paul Millington, special projects director Simon Needle, sales director Peter Threadgold, technical director Dave Isherwood and business development director Richard Wilson.

Explaining those uncertainties, he says: "West End shows need cash - *Betty Blue Eyes* was a relatively small show, but we still spent a quarter of a million pounds buying new equipment to do it, and then of course, if it closes after six months . . . you've spent a quarter of a million and earned a fraction of that back, so you've still got to make that kit work hard for you somewhere." Even a long-running show isn't necessarily a blessing: "You may get a hit . . . but then the production might say, 'Because the show's doing so well, we'll buy the rig from you' and you're left asking, 'When is it my turn to make some money?'"

John Simpson, still very much involved with White Light as chairman, sold a controlling share of the company to the current owner/directors in 2007. It was a purely successional move, not much noted by the world at large. The new owners were Raven (Simpson's successor as MD), sales director Peter Threadgold, technical director Dave Isherwood, business development director Richard Wilson and finance director Paul Millington - all long-serving employees, ensuring continuity in White Light's growth and stability.

White Light had begun to expand its sales activity to include exclusive product lines (EPLs), initially for the UK market, well before this. Robert Juliat's followspots and Look Solutions' smoke



You've checked out our profile  
Now we'd like to put you on the spot

WINNER OF THE  
**plasa2010**  
AWARDS FOR INNOVATION

Robert Juliat has extended its Aledin LED range by introducing the Aledin 330 LED Wash.

This new, variable beam 20°-98° LED washlight complements the award-winning Aledin 630 LED profile spot with which it shares the same green technology.

Together with Aledin profile, our new Aledin Wash provides the perfect low energy, high quality lighting solution to help you clean up your act.

[www.robertjuliat.com](http://www.robertjuliat.com)



**ROBERT JULIAT**  
Uncompromising quality since 1919

machines had been in the portfolio for several years by the time that White Light became the UK distributor for Australian lighting control system manufacturer LSC Lighting in 2006. Many other product lines have followed, and at the PLASA Show this year 17 brands were represented in the White Light Zone. In 2010/11 the company's sales turnover outstripped that of hire for the first time.

Such a strong hand of brands naturally brings new customers to White Light's wider range of services: this is particularly true for those it represents worldwide (i-Pix, Core Lighting) or Europe-wide (Prism Projection, CITC, Interactive Technologies and Galaxia).

Growth has also come from increasing corporate events work: the company now provides for two or three 'wet hire' events per day, on average, plus the same again as dry hires. But the company's biggest single source of revenue last year was international projects. Two major overseas projects were won in 2008 - the supply of all lighting equipment to Franco Dragone's *The House of Dancing Water* in Macau (see LSi January 2011) and the RingWerk indoor visitor centre at the Nurburgring racetrack in Germany. These successes led to the offer of a full-time position for project manager Simon Needle, who had been a frequent collaborator with White Light: he is now the company's special projects director. Another long-standing friend of the company, Chris Nicholls, has also joined the Board as operations director.

Further international work, including large jobs in Singapore and the Middle East, have since arisen on the strength of those projects.

Opportunities for further growth exist, but in the bigger picture, the company's independence means it does not have to jump, overstretch, or take risks: it can afford to wait to get things right. Raven says: "The headline of our mission statement is to be



the best lighting company - not the biggest, not the most profitable. We know we could make more money, but we prefer to spend money on improving the staff facilities and improving the quality of life - and service!"

Nevertheless, with a recent addition of warehouse space increasing the Wimbledon footprint by half, Raven estimates they have the potential for 30-40% growth. Investment in new equipment presents no problem, he explains: "The industry is established enough that our bank can go online to somewhere like GearSource and find out how much a second-hand VL3500 is, for example - and when they know we've got 250 of them, they can work out what we're worth. They have a good understanding of our business."

The only barrier to growth, therefore, is personnel. White Light's management devotes significant time to meeting and supporting students studying technical theatre courses at establishments including The BRIT School, Guildhall, Central, LAMDA and Rose Bruford. White Light is also a sponsor of the National Skills Academy for

Creative & Cultural's conference which takes place in March 2012. These are important avenues for the company. "Theatre is about the only facet of performance technology that trains people," says Raven. "There's no rock and roll equivalent of LAMDA: there's Ravensbourne for TV and, as far as I know, that's it. There is an increasing number of Further Education colleges doing performing arts, which we're working with via the NSA . . . Theatre is a great place to start because you take those skills that you learn in a theatre environment - time-keeping, budgets, responsibility, teamwork, deadlines - and you can take them anywhere. That's why rock and roll crews and corporate events crews are full of ex-theatre people."

Building ties with the best of these students pays dividends, in both the short and the very long-term. Today's student may be tomorrow's warehouse staff or technician - and later still perhaps a production manager, chief LX, lighting designer or any one of a number of other influential roles - and White Light has been around long enough to know this well. "Our staff tend to leave on good terms," says Raven, "and they go out into the industry as advocates for the company."

Other valuable relationships emerge over time: Raven recalls how, more than 20 years ago, he loaned some fixtures to a young student who was trying to light a show with no budget; that student is still a friend - but now he's also a West End theatre producer. "You can only do that if you're in it for the long-term," he says.

With the Olympic Games taking place on White Light's home territory next year, the company has been busy making itself known to Unique Venues of London (UVL), an organisation of 73 event venues, and has so far been approved as a supplier to all but a few of them. So what does Raven expect from the Olympics? "We are certainly anticipating being very busy. One of the nice things it's brought to us is that we're getting





Far left: White Light's former HQ at Filmer Road, Fulham.

Left: The team at the Wimbledon facility.

Facing page, bottom: The extensive White Light Zone, pictured at PLASA 2010 (photo: Christopher Toulmin)

a lot of confirmations now for non-Olympic work next summer, with clients wanting to make sure we'll have kit for them. It's one of our policies that if we've accepted your order, we'll do it. So people like Garsington [Opera] and Grange Park [Opera] have already given us confirmations for next year."

Raven concludes with some thoughts on 2012 generally and the importance of marketing: "I think [the Olympics] will carry

the UK industry comfortably through 2012 - and then we'll see what happens. Hopefully, the market will have recovered by then. I think theatre will have a slow year, with fewer new shows - but then we don't make our money on new shows, we make it from the old shows that keep running. I don't think that companies will throttle back on their events and marketing spend - if you do that, people notice. It's no coincidence that every year recently White Light has seen 10-15%

percent increase in sales, and every year we spend 10-15% more on the PLASA Show and our marketing . . . If we didn't do PLASA, we wouldn't be doing the kind of numbers we're doing in sales - it's as simple as that. I think companies are realising that if they don't do their AGMs, their conferences and their roadshows, they very quickly drop out of peoples' consciousness."

No danger of that happening with White Light. If only everything worked this well after 40 years.

> [www.whitelight.ltd.uk](http://www.whitelight.ltd.uk)

Readers of LSI Digital can find out more on the history of White Light by reading Rob Halliday's interview with company founder John Simpson . . .

> [//plasa.me/wl40](http://plasa.me/wl40)

## Han-Eco®

People | Power | Partnership

## Quality with Reduced Weight

Han-Eco® - the new HARTING housing series made of robust high-performance plastic.

The new Han-Eco® thermoplastic housing has excellent mechanical properties and it is lightweight. Moreover it is highly resistant against environmental influences and can additionally use one extra module from the Han-Modular® series. Versions of the hoods come with either straight or angled entries and housings, bulkhead mounting, and can be supplied in all Han® B sizes. Versatile use at lower cost.

HARTING: Pushing Performance to innovative solutions.

HARTING Ltd | Caswell Road | Brackmills Industrial Estate | Northampton | NN4 7PW |  
Phone +44 (0) 1604 827500 | Fax +44 (0) 1604 706777 | [gb@HARTING.com](mailto:gb@HARTING.com) |

[www.HARTING.com](http://www.HARTING.com)



Pushing Performance