

# Rob Halliday talks to White Light founder & chairman, John Simpson

A conversation with White Light's John Simpson is quite different from a conversation with just about anyone else working in the lighting industry: he doesn't really want to talk about lights. Or, for that matter, about business. He really wants to talk about much wider subjects: about the state of theatre, about great plays, fantastic performances - and the state of the world beyond theatre. The names he drops aren't those of lighting designers, but of those who create the work the lighting designers serve - the playwrights. What you hear most aren't the names of lights or suppliers or talk of deals, but words like 'fair' and 'right' and 'just'.

Perhaps that is why White Light has weathered four decades so well, a period with turbulent moments that have taken down any number of other lighting suppliers. The man who has run the company is more interested in serving theatre as a whole rather than slavishly following the trends of one subset of it. And his sense of fair has served it in two ways: ensuring that its customers get fair deals and so are happy to come back, but also rousing him to break up or work around situations he perceives as unfair to his company.

Like so many of us, Simpson started playing with lights as a teenager, at a local youth theatre group in Chipstead, Surrey. "I didn't really want to be on stage," he recalls, "and I was fascinated with electricity - being able to connect something here and so make something happen over there - as long as you'd got everything right along the way." He did lighting, though describing it as "functional lighting - seeing things rather than lots of messing about with colour", but the group was also perhaps where he picked up the flair for organisation that has served him so well since, since the adults let them do what they wanted and Simpson became part of a gang who ran concerts and events.

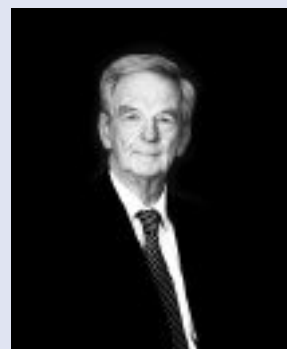
He left school without really having a grand life plan, working in the city for a bit (commuting, wearing a bowler hat!), working on a building site for a bit. After realising that he enjoyed working with young people he trained as a teacher, ending up as a drama school

teacher in Wolverhampton. Being the youngest member of staff he was given the worst class - the troublemakers, the dropouts: "They could leave school the Easter of the year they turned 15, so everyone sort of gave up on them." Simpson realised that they could improvise, and quickly the rowdiest class ended up the best organised, the children performing for their parents, the parents delighted their children had found something they enjoyed for the first time. His approach didn't necessarily meet with approval from the other staff, and after a week of running assemblies in the headmaster's absence ("where we talked about art, did improvisations"), the returning headmaster told him you're a great teacher - but you're not my sort of teacher at all . . .

Fortunately, Simpson had stumbled across an interesting job advert: "The Arts Council were looking for administrative trainers, having realised that after some years of a Labour government giving enormous amounts of money to the arts, no-one had really been keeping track of how it was all being used. There were lots of weekly rep' theatres run by old-style actor-managers who just got on and did shows, a new one every week. Receipts were just thrown in a drawer." Simpson became part of a team who would be sent in to find out what was going on ("I decided that my uncompleted night-school course in accountancy made me qualified!"), travelling the country, discovering really good quality work, really hard work, things that are hard to conceive of now.

A year later, Simpson took what he'd learnt into the post of general manager at the Watford Palace, then a weekly rep; when artistic director Giles Havergal moved to the Glasgow Citizens, Simpson went too. Life was tougher there, with indifference from the council and other funding bodies, so Simpson applied to the Royal Court in London. "The Court's directors made me go away and write up any ideas I had. Most of it wasn't hard, just attending to the details - the theatre was run down, the carpets threadbare, but they'd all been there for so long they just didn't see it."

It was at the Court that Simpson re-discovered his interest in lighting, through watching the Court's chief electrician, Andy Phillips, at work.



"Andy was lighting a new show every week, working incredibly hard. Watching him was remarkable, rarely using colour, insisting it was all about seeing the faces of the actors. And, contrary to his reputation, a great collaborator, discussing how to do things. He was also a law unto himself - I remember one play where the design had a roof over most of the stage, so over the weekend Andy and his team installed an advance bar . . ."

Simpson credits the original idea for a lighting company to Philips: "We were hiring lights - from Strand, TP, Donmar, TSL. I think Andy just wanted a collection of gear he could use without fuss - isn't that why lighting designers start rental companies? Credit cards were just becoming available and funded the company's early days. Using my card for £350 we bought 16 Patt 23s and 16 Patt 123s with cable and accessories for a transfer from the Court to the West End, lit by Andy - and that's all the rig was!"

The name for the new company was the easy part: "White Light, because that was what Andy did. It sounds like a made-up story, but it's true."

The early years were hectic, starting with moving the Court's surprise hit, *The Rocky Horror Show*, to a series of theatres in London. Feeling it wasn't right to be running a company while paid for by the taxpayer, Simpson went to work as the general manager for *Rocky*, but with a quid-pro-quo understanding with producer Michael White that he got to use the basement to store and work on lights, which he did between dealing with actors. "It's only recently that we've got rid of the last distribution panel that I wired up all those years ago," he notes.

The company grew in what would now be called an organic manner. People started calling. We'd get a show, we'd buy the gear to do that show. That's never really ended. When *Rocky* ended the company needed more space, finding Filmer Road in Fulham: White Light grew from occupying just one floor to the entire site, and more, over the next quarter century. Simpson himself found another sideline after a chance meeting with Angela Fox - an agency, looking after actors, writers and technicians. "For me, it was about looking after those people - they'd get the job, do the work, but we'd make sure they got fairly paid, were well looked after. He remained a hands-on agent until the late eighties, eventually investing the acting part ("I got tired of them calling late at night with all of their problems") and handing the day-to-day running of the rest over to David Watson. Why choose to let White Light take priority? "I think I thought it was just something more tangible."

The company's timing was, in many ways, fortuitous, since they were perfectly placed to take advantage of a new generation of lighting equipment unsaddled by vast stocks

of the old. "The 264, which Andy loved, was a great light, but it was old; Strand's replacement was the T-Spot . . ."

Simpson and Philips were invited to meet another young upstart, CCT Lighting, then developing the Silhouette: zoom lens, shutters that didn't jam, more reliable. The Sil became the mainstay of the White Light fleet for many years, later joined by Lekos from the US, Harmonies, Cantatas and eventually "this clever new light from America, which we still have now," ETC's Source Four. But if the company had a policy, it was that "we shouldn't impose on what the lighting designer wants or needs - I don't think we should be saying 'no, but we can give you 10 of these . . .'. That's not our job."

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Simpson's job, though, was to ensure his company's ability to expand, to compete. "There were many theatres we couldn't get a look-in at - the Albery theatres would always go to Donmar, the Stoll Moss theatres always went to TSL. That wasn't fair." Ultimately, White Light found additional funding from investor 3i, which allowed them to buy their competitors. "The extra funding also proved invaluable as the shows grew: suddenly, lighting budgets got bigger, perhaps driven by shows coming from America, and we were having to explain to producers that the rental was so high because we were buying hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of equipment, and we had to pay that back. The good producers understood that." Not that Simpson took every show he was offered, admitting that, "Yes, I did turn down *Cats!*," the show going on to enjoy a record-breaking 21-year run in the West End.

A decade later, the process repeated itself as Simpson became annoyed that he couldn't buy products from Vari-Lite to rent out. In typical fashion, the company went looking for alternatives, eventually forming a connection with one of the other pioneers of the modern moving light age, Morpheus, to give the basis of The Moving Light Company. Along the way, though, the game changed, the extra technology making it more expensive to

buy lights, the march of progress requiring them to be replaced more often. "It's harder to make money now," Simpson notes, "and that affected us because we had to stop some of our other activities, things like Modelbox, because it was harder to make the money from lighting to support them."

Modelbox, the innovative and ahead-of-its-time theatre CAD bureaux, which White Light acquired then ran and built up for more than a decade, expanding into areas beyond simple plan drawing, including lighting software and CGI animation, was clearly a favourite project for John Simpson. "I thought it was brilliant, and I was really proud of what we achieved. But keeping up with technology is expensive: a quarter of a million pounds on a renderfarm that was out of date the next year, that was hard. But I do notice that every time the BBC talk about Albert Speer, they still use the beautiful graphics we made for them all those years ago."

In recent years, White Light has concentrated more closely on its core activity of entertainment lighting, though expanding far beyond the 'theatre rental' area that many people still associate it with. They also - to the relief of HGV drivers! - moved from Fulham to large industrial buildings in Wimbledon with easy truck access. In 2007, the company moved into the next stage of its history when Simpson sold a controlling stake to the team who had been his lieutenants for many years, managing director Bryan Raven, technical director Dave Isherwood, sales director Peter Threadgold, development director Richard Wilson and financial director Paul Millington. Between them, the company's new owners average 15 years at the company, Raven having been there since 1987; the transition went so smoothly that few people in the industry actually noticed. Simpson himself is delighted at the way things have played out. "I have quite a loose way of running things; I believe that good people will prove themselves and you can leave it up to them to work things out, then to run things."

Equally, though, he admits that things get harder as the company gets bigger. "There are a hundred and twenty people working for the company now. Knowing that you'll affect all of them if you get it wrong; I think Bryan and his fellow directors are finding the same thing now, though I'm really glad that there is now a team of people to share those discussions and decisions rather than having to make them all on your own."

Simpson remains closely involved, as chairman of White Light and with involvement with many other companies in the entertainment industry (notably automation specialists Stage Technologies) and now beyond. "I'm still here - and I seem to have found plenty of things to fill my time with . . ."

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