

A Personal Tribute to Ron Hebbard

Ron was a significant and unmistakable presence in the amateur and professional scene in the GHA for well over a quarter of a century. Seeing him at work – and I never saw him at rest! – one had to remember this was only the tip of the iceberg. Unseen were the hours spent beavering into the night on his own. One had to imagine how he hung and focused lights completely unaided, unless you had seen him propel himself atop the Blue Monster across the floor of the Garstin Centre with a thrust of his hips. If a job had to be done, it would be done, you could be sure of that. But that did not mean taking him for granted. That you did at your peril.

For Ron, there were no compromises, no shortcuts. Everything had to be the best that it could be. I remember when we did *The 39 Steps* for example that we had many sound cues going on at the same time. Nowadays we would have all the sounds programmed into a computer so that they could be played together, beginning and ending separately. In this particular play there were some instances when we had 4 simultaneous cues. Ron's solution was to put them all on 4 separate mini-disks, stacked on top of each other. This had the advantage that the volume could be adjusted for each independently. So Ron sat on the catwalk peering over the top of this bank of minidisks (he did not like being in the booth because you did not hear the live sound as it was in the auditorium). The result was phenomenal whether it was trains at full speed, in and out of tunnels, pulling into stations, cars failing to start, sheep blocking the road, divebombing and crashing aeroplanes or – my favourite – a duel between him and Graham Clements in drag opening a closing a door to a room where a riotous party was going on.

On the same show he also designed the lighting. We needed spotlights. I had thought of hiring a spotlight and have John Durbin move it around as needed. When I announced this at the first production meeting, Ron was apoplectic. How could I have made this decision without consulting him? Relations were difficult between us for the rest of the show, but Ron had a better solution. We would have a single spot which could be refocused on a different area of the stage by means of a computer programme. This worked very well as long as the actors did as they were told every night. We also had loaned some scrollers from Village Theatre Waterdown, which could be programmed to have different colour filters on them. The trouble was the movement of the spots and scrollers made a lot of noise and was a terrible distraction from the action on stage. Ron was not one of those techies who was not bothered about the dramatic action. His favourite word for all sound and lighting cues was that fades up and down should be "tasteful". In this case good taste was preserved by programming some dummy lighting cues which would change their position or filter very, very slowly (and noiselessly) so that unnoticed by the audience they would miraculously appear as needed.

The result of Ron's work and the expert guidance of David Rundle was that the Q2Q was carried out in record time and without a hitch for a show which had hundreds of complicated sound and lighting cues. And it was these cues which, added to the versatility of the actors, made the play work. As I said, though, on this show Ron and I did not get on. It grieved me because I had so much respect for him, but he had come to the conclusion that I was, as my mother would say, "all mouth and no trousers". Not necessarily wide of the mark, but I wanted so much to please him.

Anyone has ever worked with Ron will have appreciated that he was not easy. Possessed of a violent temper, no sufferer of fools (like me!), classic OCD, somewhere on the spectrum, but kind and attentive to a fault at times. Once a show was in production, there was no more committed member of the team than Ron. Especially, if he had a personal stake in it. One example of this was the production of *Halflife*

at VT, which was about memory loss in the elderly. It was the last show in which Ray Jenkins and Pat Howlett appeared. But I suspect it was the theme of the play which got him on board. Or maybe, come to think of it, it was the presence of my wife Maggie, for whom Ron always had great respect and affection (which was reciprocated!)

Ron was also a superb technician. At DLT he designed and built the backstage lighting system and the link between the booth and headsets. I suspect that BT, VT and the Guild all have similar permanent reminders of his selfless handiwork. Fortunately, that expertise together with the ethos of working in theatre has been passed on and is alive today in the many people who worked with him.

Ron gave so much of his life to community theatre that it is only too easy to forget that he was also a treasured asset in the professional world. And a member of a professional guild. This is why he appeared on many community theatre programmes under the alias of "P. Carpenter". Alas, that name will not appear again on our programmes, but I do hope "Ron Hebbard" will appear soon as a tribute to his numberless contributions to DLT!

I humbly invite other contributions!

George Thomas