

# Obituary

## Ken Smalley

As Technical Officer of the ABTT throughout the late sixties and most of the seventies, Ken Smalley was a key pioneer in the development of technical theatre training. This was a period when the formal backstage courses offered by drama schools were based primarily on the acquisition of stage management skills. While these courses did include practical stage experience, they were not geared to meeting the crewing needs of a theatre that was on a fast-track absorption of new technologies. The Arts Council recognised the problem and provided the ABTT with funding to explore fresh possibilities for training and to develop sources of technical information.

Starting his career as a dancer with Ballet Rambert, Ken Smalley had wide experience as a technician before moving from the Mermaid Theatre to the ABTT where he rapidly became an invaluable information resource. We rang Ken then in the way that we google now.

At the time, a series of factual information cards on a wide range of technical topics were sent to members as monthly mailings of batches of A4 sheets to be cut into four filing cards that built up into a resource base of useful hardware and where to find it. With these mailings came a newsletter that became known informally as the *Smalley Times*. This was a mix of newspaper and magazine cuttings with typewritten bits of news written by Ken and by members whom he tended to ring on the eve of going to print. He badgered us a bit, but we cooperated because the ABTT was at the cutting edge of exciting times.

He had an uncanny instinct for knowing who might have a news item or a controversial view and so the *Smalley Times* often peppered its facts with quite sharp debate. In the days before digital cut and paste, publication was laborious work with scalpel and glue pot followed by endless turning of a duplicator handle while getting spattered with ink in a tradition originating with Caxton and only recently lost. Ken's skill in press cutting was to cull not just technical items but the very wide context in which theatre technology operates. When the Arts Council withdrew support and we lost Ken, we also lost a potential

webmaster who could have made our website the pivot of the ABTT.

Ken was a lateral thinker – perhaps a touch too lateral for some of his more staid colleagues – and he got things done. His daily swim and exercise regime gave him boundless energy and there was something metaphorical about his daily attire – a safari suit – as he set out to implement ABTT in-service training programmes. Using telephone conference calls, he was able to set up an informed debate about the direction and details of a way forward.

Two of Ken's achievements were, in my view, particularly notable. With Paddington Tech, he was pivotal in setting up the theatre electricians course attended by many of today's leading resident and production electricians. And he developed a particularly effective 24 hour lighting design course formula based on productions running in regional reps.

Participants were sent an information

pack with all available plans, lists and details of the production and the theatre. They were asked to bring a lighting design plan to afternoon session where all the plans were shared and compared with a lighting designer as amateur. Only after this session did they go on stage to look at the set and unlit rig. After seeing the show and an extended discussion in the bar, next morning brought a flash out followed by a session with as many of the production team as could be gathered together. When we had director and/or set designer with us, these debates were some of the most fruitful I have experienced.

Then, in one of its rather infamous priority shifts, the Arts Council abandoned the ABTT and we lost Ken Smalley. He became a Fellow in recognition of his achievements but rarely appeared at Association functions. His influence on the development of the ABTT cannot be overstated.

*Francis Reid*

*Ken Smalley (right) with John Bury in Prague for the Quadrennial in 1987*

