

Preparation for a future of automation

While **Barbara Eifler** has her head buried in backstage books to bring you the highlights, **Chris High** savours the delights of *Walking With Dinosaurs*, which toured UK arenas over the summer

Automation in the Entertainment Industry

Authors: Mark Ager and John Hastie
 Publisher: Entertainment Technology Press
 ISBN: 1904031587
 Price £29.95

Entertainment Technology Press has just published *Automation in the Entertainment Industry* by Mark Ager and John Hastie, co-founders of Stage Technologies.

Part I – An Automation Overview is extremely useful, whatever your interest, background or role off stage. Part II – A Technical Guide was a little more than I, as a non-specialist, wanted. But even so, this book is worth reading – it gives you an overview of what automation is.

You will learn what can be automated and how, for just one show or for a venue, and, helpfully, what the implications are in terms of management, timings, rehearsals, installation and staff training – the full pros, and some of the cons.

Aye, there's the rub. They do list some arguments against automation, and some for manual systems, but being champions of automation, they inevitably speak of it with enthusiasm, and talk up its achievements and rosy future.

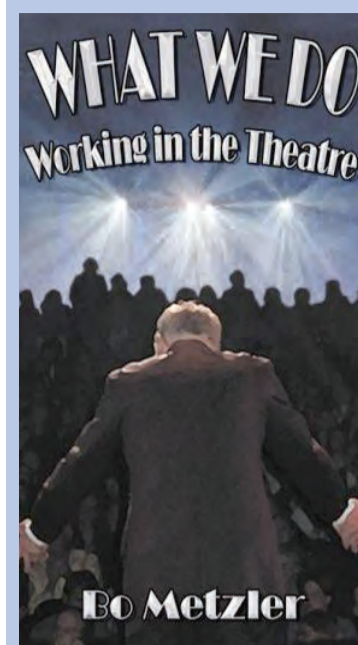
Briefly, the pros are more spectacular effects, produced more reliably and with fewer manual handling hazards. The future is shown where audiences leave humming the scenery. The arguments against are cost, time, staffing, structural (building) and training implications. Their positive bias is my only, if major, reservation, and one that every reader can bear in mind while benefiting from the clearly laid out information, in plain English, peppered with quotes from people you know of, and examples of shows you've seen/heard about.

These guys have street cred – they've created some of the most spectacular theatrical effects of the last 15 years and been encouraged along their path by Cameron Mackintosh who writes of them "combining modern techniques with the old-fashioned can do Heath Robinson approach that, thankfully, still abounds in the British theatre".

Automation – take it or leave it. But learn about it you must, as you'll be meeting it more frequently in future, on any scale of performance. Your money will be well spent on this book unless you already know, as Sir Cameron says of the legendary Mike Barnett, "how to make even pigs fly".

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What We Do – Working in the Theatre

Author: Bo Metzler
 Publisher: Infinity Publishing
 ISBN-10: 0741450046
 Price: £12.95

Bo Metzler, a co-founder of the US Stage Managers' Association, has been an actor, playwright, director, designer, stage manager, dresser, stagehand and everything else, mainly on Broadway, for the last 30 years. So he undeniably knows what he's talking about.

The book was written to answer those questions posed innocently by relatives and others back home as to 'What exactly it is that you do?'. We've all struggled to answer these without starting with Adam and Eve – Metzler's written the book.

He briefly sketches all the main jobs in theatre – from playwright, to producer, to director, to designer, to performers, to technical staff. We also get types of theatre, from Broadway to summer stock, how they all get work (or not) and who works in what type of theatre, regulated by what union.

It's brilliant. Not only is Metzler able to write clearly and concisely, but he may also inadvertently have written an international best-seller. Despite knowing something about the differences in roles and duties backstage between the UK and the US, I still didn't know half of what Metzler writes about, because nobody ever gives you the context. That's precisely what this book does.

This is, therefore, the must read book if you ever have any dealings with US theatre personnel either side of the pond, but don't buy it for your British granny – you'll confuse her even more – buy it for yourself. It'll make your life so much easier. And did I mention it's an enjoyable read, too?

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The car – an example of the automation used in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*