



Fred Foster checks out a new board.

HENRY KOSHOLLEK/The Capital Times

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Low-profile Middleton firm puts electronic spotlights on the stars

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MIDDLETON — When Bette Midler strutted her stuff on tour recently, she was in the spotlight thanks to a little-known firm from here.

When costumed characters at two well-known theme parks in Anaheim, Calif., and Orlando, Fla., do their nightly parade, it is again due to the shining example of the same company.

The firm, Electronic Theatre Controls, Inc. is the brainchild of two brothers. The company is so low-profile that it doesn't even have a sign on the door of the green building it shares in Middleton with Tracor Northern's machine shop.

The building, at 3002 W. Beltline, is hidden behind a couple of garages and sheds and you need a map to find the place. And this suits Fred Foster, ETC's president, fine.

"We're just sitting out here doing our job. There's no sign on the door because we don't want people bothering us and, besides, very few people are going to walk in off the street and buy a \$20,000 to \$25,000 light board from us," he explains.

ETC is a one-product company and that product is an electronic, programmable device for controlling the lighting in movie houses and theaters.

Foster was a student of the late University of Wisconsin theater professor Gilbert Hemsley, and the prototype of the light board was unveiled at a Christmas party in Hemsley's home in 1976. Its first use was in a February 1977 production of the Madison Civic Opera Co. at the Union Theater.

For six years the board was marketed through a national company called Colortran. ETC made the "innards" and Colortran used its own cabinet and sold it under its own name.

"We were selling them the basic unit for \$5,000 to \$6,000," Foster recalls. "They were adding a few things, putting it in a fancy package

and selling it for up to \$40,000. Needless to say, we got tired that somebody else was making big money off our labor."

So, in March 1983, ETC broke with Colortran and started marketing the product on its own under the name "Concept." In all, about 250 ETC-made units have been sold and installed, with about 25 of them under the Concept label.

Middleton-made units are in place from Rio de Janeiro to Las Vegas to Dartmouth to the famed theme parks.

"By contract, I'm not allowed to tell you the names of the parks. If I do a certain mouse character would be after me," Foster explained with a grin.

Colortran installed ETC boards in the California park and when a new dome-covered center was started in Florida, ETC was a lighting consultant.

"This is what separated us from Colortran. We got a contract with the center on our own and we have seven Concept boards in place," Foster noted.

The company has five employees here, plus Foster's brother and sister-in-law, who live in Ann Arbor, Mich. Brother William, a Harvard PhD in physics, is the firm's technical whiz and helped develop the computer's unique programming system.

The system's versatility and internal computer program are the "magic" that puts ETC ahead of its

competitors, Fred Foster says.

"Our board has 125 channels and, when fully programmed, it can control 1,000 dimmers and switches. This spring we're bringing out a 250-channel model. That way we can just about cover the whole market."

Another project under consideration is a proposal by a Canadian company to sell the board in that country, but under a different label.

Here's what the board does:

During a normal stage production, stagehands manually twist knobs or move levers to dim lights, turn spotlights off and on, or change background lighting.

But ETC's device makes this a one-finger operation. The Concept is programmed for movement on the stage as the scene or dialogue changes.

"After the director decides where each actor will be on stage and how the action will flow, the lighting director then programs the movements and the necessary lighting. On opening night, someone simply follows the dialogue and hits the 'cue' button and the lights change automatically," Foster explained.

The great thing about the system is that for the next night's performance, nothing has to be done because the lighting board is still programmed. The process eliminates stagehands and makes production easier and cheaper.

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In multi-screen movie houses, Concept can be programmed to automatically dim the lights when features start at various times. TV studios also are big potential customers. A Boston station, WCVB-TV, is currently installing a Madison-made Concept.

"Road and rock shows are playing a new town every night so our programming feature doesn't mean as much to them," Foster said. "However, Bette Midler used one of our boards on her tour this summer. It worked well and so far we've gotten positive feedback so other performers might give us a try."

Here, Foster interrupted himself to

tell why ETC is getting a reputation in the theater industry for a good product and for fast, reliable service.

"Midler's stagehands had left their equipment outdoors before a concert at Forest Hills in Flushing, N.Y., and it had rained. A half-hour before concert time they discovered the lighting board wouldn't work and they called us," he explained. "Over the phone, we told them what parts and microchip boards to test and we had the unit fixed by the time Midler was ready to take the stage."

Besides the Fosters, other company officers are Dr. Robert Gilson of Gilson Electronics and Gary Bewick.