

Lee Ragonese on Saloon Lighting

By James L. Moody

The interview with Lee Ragonese was conducted at Harrah's at Lake Tahoe, Nevada, on a cold February night between shows. Lee has been staff lighting director there for the past five years and has been with Harrah's for 14 years. Originally from New Jersey, Lee drifted west to attend the University of Reno, then landed his first job at Harrah's operating audio consoles in the show-room that Harrah's opened in 1966.

Like concert lighting, cabaret lighting isn't taught in school. What is it and how did it develop?

Background

Jim: I understand that Harrah's is very prone to promote from within. Is that how you became lighting director?

Lee: Pretty much so. I had a lot of on-the-job-training working local radio and television. Radio stations would sponsor programs like local beauty pageants. You'd hang the light and stage the show. That night you'd be the singer, the M.C., whatever.

Jim: How did you go from sound to lighting?

Lee: Harrah's has a unique operation. Everyone works everything, so in working sound I learned everything else that was happening on stage. I actually came to the lake to manage the lounges which I did for five or six years. As lounge manager, you do everything. In those days it was a one-man operation 90 percent of the time.

Jim: What did the lounge acts consist of in the "old days"?

Lee: Twenty years ago many lounge acts were variety acts that tried to have something for everyone. Everybody played, everybody sang. Another type was the stand-up singer or instrumentalist with marquee value.

Jim: Was the real reason for the lounge to give people a break from the casino, but not hold them too long from playing?

Lee: Entertainment in any casino is to bring people in the building. It's strictly a service. There's a lot more to Lake Tahoe than the casinos. Name acts still draw people who wouldn't normally come here. Furthermore, we expect to do every type of show here. That's why the stage is hung the way it is and why we put the system in the way we did.



Above: Lee Ragonese at the remote console with Chip Largeman, lighting designer for Kenny Rogers. Right: Unusual, hand-painted front curtain is highlighted at Harrah's Stateline Cabaret, the technically best equipped lounge of its size in Nevada.



Next year I suspect we'll do something that we never expected.

Saloon Lighting

Jim: You call this saloon lighting, but it really goes farther than that.

Lee: Very much so. Universities aren't turning out people for nightclub lighting. We're training our own people. Schools turn out people to light the legitimate stage and to be teachers. For years and years, the music schools did this, too. They didn't turn out professional musicians.

The difference in saloon lighting is that you don't have time to sit with a show, to live with a show and to really design a show. You meet a lot of acts. They'll give you a four-hour rehearsal and maybe three hours to show time. You have to make that act look like something.

It used to be very simple — just keep the light on the money and you couldn't go wrong. Today, there are a lot of unschooled acts. They haven't come up through lounges or the big bands where they learn how to perform on stage. You better make them look pretty and know how to light the orchestra, and it helps if they have a big set. Saloon lighting is instant design, immediate creation.

We ran 42 different shows last year. Never being dark means that you load out at 2:00 a.m., hang, design and rehearse, and hit that night at 8 p.m. Of those 12 or 15 shows I did last year, probably three of them had a two-day rehearsal; two or three forwarded reliable advance information. The only show I light each year where I go out of town and see a rehearsal is the *Lawrence Welk Show*. Still, it's never the same by the time it comes in. You hang things so they're easy to change, with multiple uses for everything.

Jim: How about a lounge review like *Bedazzle*?

Lee: They have out-of-town rehearsals, but they'll rehearse for about a week here. We'll get a couple of run-throughs. Normally, I get three days. One day there's rehearsal, the next day we should have something concrete. But, you still can't do anything until the night before opening because the other acts are using the facilities. At least it's down on paper.

Crew Size

Lee: We run a twelve-man crew in the South Shore Room and a ten-man crew in the lounge. If a show requires more, we hire more, but we never cut back below twelve. Since we like our

people to do more than one job, the extra man hours are for training, maintenance, or just clean-up. We can have twelve spotlight operators, or we can have twelve carpenters. We run a sliding scale — a wide range of pay. The more you learn, the more money you can make.

Jim: I've noticed that some of the kids working the tear-downs and set-ups are dealers or working waiters.

Lee: A lot have college backgrounds in technical theatre and associated areas. Lake Tahoe is an attractive place to live; young people take any job just to be able to live here. When we need thirty people to unload a truck, we post a bulletin on the bulletin board.

People in other departments are interested in getting on the stage crew. But, the only time we had more than one person leave in a short period was when the MGM opened. I'd like to think that it's what they learned here that got them the head jobs at MGM.

Jim: How often do you do TV shows?

Lee: One year we did *Mike Douglas* for two weeks, *Sammy & Company* for three weeks, and four or five specials. This past year all we did was subscription television.

Jim: Do most of the shows work close to your control and dimmer capacity?

Lee: No. They haven't even approached



In the "old days", most nightclub performers worked in front of an orchestra. This was Paul Anka's set-up in March of 1974. Today he trumps an elaborate set with hydraulic risers and special effects.

it, except for your John Denver show. Even then, we didn't get into repatching. Another thing...very few people know how to design a show to take advantage of the memory systems. I like to think I do. I lived with the system, grew with it, trained all our operators...well, not all of them. I like to think that I do more with the system than anyone else who comes here, and the reason I do is to challenge the operators. In any show I design, I give them a move they haven't made before just to make them better operators.

Jim: I hope that the people who re-curringly come in rooms like this will see the capacity, the use of the system, and start to take advantage of it more.

Lee: It's difficult when you're traveling. You design a show for a memory system, then hit a place without one. So, you have to keep it to where it can be done on a manual board also.

Jim: And, time is so important. You're dealing with a type of show that isn't done anywhere else except here or Vegas.

Lee: But, I do have the advantage. Lawrence Welk only works here. I can design that show to run here without worrying about taking it someplace else.

Jim: Do you keep the disc on all the acts that come in?

Lee: On the ones I think will come back. Of course, acts rarely come back with the same show. They change, but it gives me a starting point. I'm also talking mostly about the music. The set usually outlives the latest hit.

Harrah's Facelift — Lounge

Lee: Before the re-hab, we probably had twelve pre-set auto transformers with levels set at certain intensities to balance

the stage for general looks. You could have a three color stage and four/five specials. The use of a followspot was a show-to-show thing, but without a light booth you had to set it up in the room. We operated there with remote controlled spotlights.

The lounge used to hold about 100 people. The stage was a thrust stage, probably 25 feet wide and 12 to 14 feet deep with eight or nine feet overhead maximum. At one time the lounge was in a corner. It evolved until it was the center of the casino, glassed in on three sides. It was fun for the audience,



Today, Harrah's reflects the changes in entertainment.

but technically inadequate, and a lot of acts felt uncomfortable working in a giant goldfish bowl.

However, around 1965, the Reno Hotel opened and the emphasis was in Reno. Remodeling the lounge got delayed. We were very fortunate, though, because when we did get to remodel, memory systems weren't out of line monetarily.

We put in the first Kliegl Performance

installed anyplace in the country — in the world actually. It's a 64-channel system with 160 memories, 120 load circuits, and a standard Saf-Patch panel. We have three electric strips overhead on stage and a single cove over the light booth. We have two Trooperette III spotlights in the light booth, and maybe 100 fixtures, mostly 6 x 12" Lekos from the front of the house, and 6 x 9-Lekos on stage. We also have a few dozen 6" Fresnels. We bought them all new.

We have 6" Fresnels for stage washes and for some upstage drops. I bought the mini version of the Kliegl Far Cyc to light the cyclorama and rear projection sheet. I laid out the system on paper to light a review, so you could light from at least three directions — every inch of stage all the way up to the upstage drop. That took precedence on where the connector strips were, where your load circuits were, what kind of fixtures you bought.

—Actually, I designed around the light plot. We wanted to be lit in four colors from front — in this case from front, cross, and overhead. The physical dimensions of the stage prevented any really good positions for backlight. It's pushed into the corner and kind of triangular. It has about a 35-foot proscenium open-

ing, but it tapers back. You have 20-feet from the apron to the cyc, but when you get back there it's only 16 feet wide.

Jim: And there's no fly rail in the cabaret?

Lee: No, it's unistrut; everything is dead-hung. We do have 16-foot overhang which allows us to use a few drop lines.

Jim: What approach did you take in laying out the system? Did management

Saloon Lighting...

ask how much it would cost, or did they let you come up with the package first?

Lee: At Harrah's you design what you feel will do the job, and you find the cost. Then, you get it approved. I designed what was necessary to run this type of major lounge review. It cost around \$100,000 at 1977 prices, not including installation. We used outside contractors.

Jim: How long did the whole process take?

Lee: Two years almost to the day. It was about a six-month construction project and it was built right behind, on top of, around and encompassing the old room. The old room was only shut down for three days.

We stayed open even with temporary seating. The last three days we worked 24 hours a day to get the new one open. It opened December 1978, and it seats 1200 for the cocktail show and under 900 for dinner shows.

Show Changes — South Shore Room

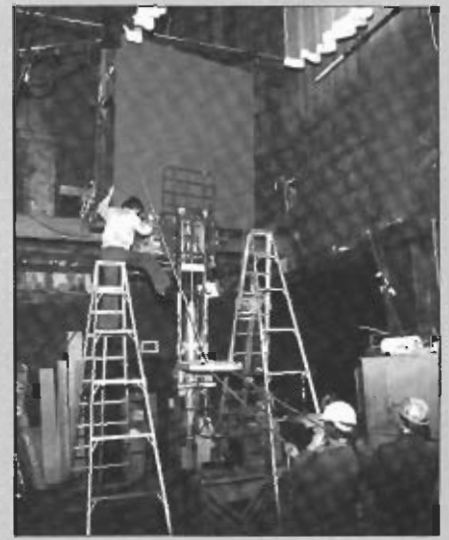
Lee: The business has changed this room from its set-up in 1959. The sight

lines in the room were for a cye at 25-feet, and the orchestra was in a pit. We haven't used the pit since 1967 or '68.

Then, all of a sudden we get the stand-up singer or recording act that wants the band behind them. Now we're putting an orchestra on stage and going back 30/35 feet and sight lines are cut off. Nobody can see past the 25-foot mark.

Jim: The main room is called the South Shore Room, and it had the original lighting package until you made this change recently.

Lee: Yes, the original package was there, and it was added to, but it wasn't adequate. Our intent in the South Shore Room was to upgrade our system. We didn't have enough power, dimmers or even load circuits, and we didn't have adequate control. Shortly after the room first opened we realized all these problems, and a second switchboard was installed on stage with ten 6000-watt auto transformer dimmers for which we hired a second board operator. When it came to upgrading the system we were very lucky. It was so obsolete we wouldn't get replacement parts, service, or even information on part houses. It had to be updated to meet OSHA Code. And, the



To save space, the new patch panel was installed in two sections on a metal rack overhead. Ragonese supervised the installation from the top of a ladder.

easiest way was to put in an entirely new system. My complaints all of a sudden became a blessing.

Jim: What did you get new for this room?

Lee: We put in new power besides a whole new system in an existing build-

Because your reputation deserves it.

L4FOUR
SYSTEM LIGHT CONTROLLER



EIKOR

A DIVISION OF OMNCOMP, 5150 N. 16TH ST., SUITE 253, PHOENIX, AZ 85016 602/264-2475

Saloon Lighting...

ing. We put in 2000 amps per leg from another generator room in the hotel side and a new power transformer. We ripped out a room that was a sauna in the dressing room area and made an ultra-cool dimmer room. We keep it about 60 degrees in there. There are 96 dimmers — 48 12 Kw, 24 7 Kw, and 24 3 Kw Kliegl Model R80 dimmers. We got everything from one manufacturer.

We have a 96 dimmer system, a Kliegl 96 channel Performance Board with 217 memories. The memory capacity of the little board out in the cabaret is 160 which allows you to do two reviews and three other acts and change them every week. Also, we put in new three-wire connector strips. In the front of the house it was impossible to get the old connector strips out because so many air conditioning ducts had been put in. We installed boxes with long tails every so many feet for the loads in the house.

Looking at future expansion, we took some positions as tormentor positions, even though none of the anti-proscenium coves come down the sides of the walls. Someday, I hope to get rid of the production stages and just bring the lighting position down there. I also intentionally left the patch panel and dimmer room

out of the light booth area just in case the room gets expanded and the light booth is moved back.

We really didn't have space for a patch panel of this size, so we had to build a metal rack and put it overhead in the right upstage corner. We have probably 480 or 490-20 amp circuits, another 90-50 amp loads, and then we put in 8-100 amp loads around the proscenium. The 100 amp loads are strictly in case we get a television show.

Jim: You kept fixtures here in this room as opposed to starting from scratch, right?

Lee: We overhaul our fixtures yearly. We kept everything we had and entered a package for new front-of-the-house lighting, new cross-lighting in the number one and two entrances, and additional cyc lighting. What we really bought with the new system were somewhere in the neighborhood of 80 or 90 Berkey Ellipsoids of varying degrees, starting with 12 degrees for the front of the house, and then pairs that were 10 degrees and a 20 degree for the cross lighting. We bought four color Kliegl ground row to light the bottom of our cyc. It was double-end quartz.

Jim: Were the Far Cyc fixtures there?

Lee: The Far Cyc fixtures we had

purchased earlier; both are four color.

Orchestra and Stage

Jim: Does the turntable still work?

Lee: Yes, but the orchestra is on top of it. The outer turntable is 26-feet in diameter with its center 25-feet upstage from the edge of the apron. There's a smaller turntable in the center of the big one. If you did a production with your upstage wall at this 25-foot mark, you could have three or four rotating sets on it, and everyone in the audience would be able to see them, too.

Jim: How many flies? Is it double hung or single?

Lee: Single. We have 60 lines with as many electrics as needed from show to show. We have five permanent electric connector strips, designed so they would also act as portable strips. Instead of running the cable up to the grid with a saddle, we ran it all the way off the end of the pipe and looped it as if you had a hod of cable out. Now, you can take this connector strip off and move it three or four feet on either side, if it's not on the right pipe. We have five connector strips overhead. The fifth one is all the way on the upstage wall for cyc lighting since our normal cyc is a rear process sheet. That doesn't include the one that's in the proscenium.

Before the fly lines start, there's a stationary strip in the proscenium, then there are five connector strips on stage and going up and down stage. Along the sides of the stage there are pipes with 40 loads on each side so when you come off a pipe you just go up. In theory, if all your loads were there it would really be great. Then any pipe can be an electric. But, any time you hang electrics on 6-inch centers, you really can't use the pipes on one side or the other, so we have an empty hole on each side of our permanent electrics.

We have probably 400 fixtures on stage. I think I counted 280-6" ellipsoids at one time.

Jim: Just the ellipsoids? You use PAR strips rather than R strips here, right?

Lee: Right. We have 22 or 24 PAR Strips hanging now. They're 6-foot long, three color circuit models which use the 500w PAR 64 bottle. We also have 48 1 Kw PAR heads and another 48 2 Kw 10-foot Fresnels. Out in the front of the house we have a dozen old Century 3000 watt ellipsoids and another six of their old 1-2 Kw cannons. They are special purpose, such as for that blue wash on the downstage scrim. These types

LIGHTING DIMENSIONS

51% OFF

SYLVANIA STTV LAMPS

Berkey
Colortran

OSCO

SYLVANIA

GELATRAN

ELECTRO
CONTROLS INC.

Strong
ELECTRIC

Teatronics
INCORPORATED

KNOXVILLE

ALTMAN

Scenic Studios, INC.

Theatre & Lighting Consultants for 45 years.

P.O. Box 1029, Knoxville, Tennessee 37901, Telephone (615)577-5551

CIRCLE #26

About the Author

James L. Moody, president of Sundance Lighting Corporation, 21907 Gresham St., Canoga Park, Calif., has designed lighting for television specials, theatre, conventions, religious tours and rock groups. He has authored more than 20 feature articles for industry trade magazines. Moody holds degrees from Southern Illinois University and University of California at Los Angeles.

of fixtures are rarely seen in newer installations, and a lot of the designers coming through here have never seen anything like them. I probably could find you a dozen 10-inch beam projectors, also.

Jim: You didn't mention that you've also got the portable little suitcase version of the console with the TV monitor.

Lee: Very necessary — extremely necessary. The same system was installed on Caesar's Palace without the portable remote, and there are the same problems. There's still a guy up in the booth who has to run dimmers up for you. That's wasted manpower. Our way, you have everything right at your hands, and you can set a show from the room. Our portable remote plugs in both on stage and out in the center of the room. It cuts down the communication problem; you don't have to worry about headsets.

Jim: How long has the Performance Board been in the main room?

Lee: About a year...the warranty is just about ready to run out.

Jim: In general, has this equipment worked out? Obviously something like this gets planned, and it's really almost two years since you originally decided what you wanted, right?

Lee: Five years. It just took us this long to get it approved. We were lucky we waited, seeing how much equipment has changed in those five years.

Jim: In other words, the 96 channels has worked out?

Lee: We've never run out of memories. Once you came in and used all the dimmers on Captain & Tennille, but we still didn't use the repatch.

Jim: I hold that record at the MGM, too. Are you pretty happy with what you've got now?

Lee: We are in pretty good shape. Of course, I'd like to get rid of some of our older style fixtures and buy new ones. But, that's all!

DECEMBER 1979

WE HAVE EXPANDED!

- Stage Lighting and Theatrical Equipment
- Disco Lighting Effects
- Confetti and Snow Machines
- Spinning Mirrored Prisms
- Scenic Supplies & Hardware

FOR YOUR FULL RETAIL NEEDS
CALL US

BESTEK
ENTERTAINMENT
EQUIPMENT CO.

(516) 794-3953

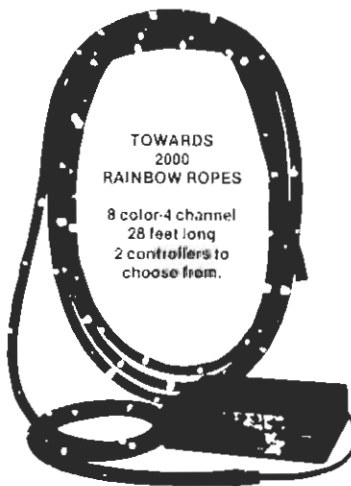
386 NEWBRIDGE AVE. EAST MEADOW, N.Y.

CIRCLE #27



Presents

RAINBOW ROPELIGHTS



PEASOUPER FOG MACHINE



We are also suppliers of a full range of portable sound & lighting systems, including affordable laser systems, bubble machines, mobile disco consoles, effect projectors & lighting control units. See these things and Pulsars new 10 way chaser at the IEE LAS VEGAS Stand E34. Free catalogue on request.

Towards 2000 6426 Lankershim Bl, N. Hollywood, CA 91606
Dealer Inquiries Welcome (213) 769-5622

CIRCLE #28