



GDN131011Spotlight

BLACK BOX RESTORER: Leo Bolter in the Regent on Broadway with the Kliegl Brothers spotlight he's partially restored.

Back in the spotlight

By ROB MILDON

A historic spotlight, rescued from the rubble of the Palmerston North Opera House, has seen the light of day once more thanks to a dedicated lighting enthusiast.

Leo Bolter was a follow-spot operator at the Opera House from 1974 until its demolition in 1996.

Fellow operator Noel Foot spotted a pair of 1915 Kliegl Brothers spotlights about to end up in a skip and decided to rescue them.

"He arrived at my doorstep with these lamps and said, 'you might be able to do something with these'," said Mr Bolter.

Do something he did: a sandblast of the exterior

removed the rust, and a coat of paint had it looking like new.

The light's interior was another story, however. The decades of use and the way the light operated had not been kind.

The Kliegl lights didn't use a bulb like modern spotlights. Instead they created an intensely bright electrical arc that leapt between two carbon rods. No reflectors were involved — the spot was simply that portion of the light escaping through the lens at the front.

Because of this, the rest of the box absorbed almost all of the tremendous energy the arc generated. Pre-restoration photos show scorched and blasted metal, rust, and brass

rod-holders and wiring coated with a thick white powdery residue.

"It was absolutely atrocious," says Mr Bolter.

He has tidied up the wiring, cleaned away the rust and polished one of the two rod-holders back to its original condition. To make sure evidence of the effect of the spotlight's operation remains, the rest of the interior he left as-is.

"Now it's just 'atrocious'," he jokes.

Although he never used the Kliegl — the Opera House upgraded to Rank-Strand 765s in 1973 — Mr Bolter says operating them would have been a difficult job. To stand close by such a heat source

while maintaining absolute concentration on the stage, would have demanded great fortitude.

The gases produced as the carbon rods burned away meant the whole spot box had to be fan ventilated "like a fish and chip shop".

The Rank-Strands are working still, lighting up the stage at the Regent on Broadway; but even though the Kliegl's day is done, they have a story yet to tell. When Mr Bolter was sandblasting them, he discovered someone's initials scratched into the metal casing.

Who put them there, and when, is the next part of the Kliegl's history that he intends to unravel.