



Women in Lighting get WiSE

Six months ago, regular L&S contributor Sarah Rushton-Read co-founded Women in Lighting, along with award-winning lighting designer Paule Constable. Here she explains why there is a need for the organisation in the first place, and why they're branching out . . .

UK - From 1 June this year, Women in Lighting (WiL) will re-launch as Women in Stage Entertainment (WiSE). Why? Because women in other areas of the stage and entertainment business have asked to get involved - and we say the more the merrier.

You might think the last thing this forward-thinking industry needs is an organisation to represent women. However, in just six months, Women in Lighting has attracted well over 100 members worldwide, proving that need.

Since Paule Constable and I set up Women In Lighting in November 2009 it has built up a large and diverse membership from all areas of the lighting industry. We have designed an interactive website and more recently launched our popular social networking site. Now we want to expand that to other technical and backstage disciplines in entertainment.

The Website has been generously funded by sponsorship from a number of industry businesses including Lee Filters, ETC, Northern Light, White Light, Rosco, Howard Eaton Lighting and Red Create Website Design.

Until now, WiL has provided a valuable and diverse discussion platform. Members are from all career stages, from students to well-established professionals, and hail from all over the world. This means our more experienced members can share their knowledge and experience with those with fewer keys on their belts! All members have an interest or work in one or more of the sectors of

theatre, touring, sales, manufacturing, architecture or education. Now we are looking forward to welcoming the opinions of women who work in the disciplines of sound, video, stage engineering, theatre consultancy and other technical disciplines.

Paule Constable says: "The aim of Women in Lighting has always been to address the issues surrounding the obvious under-representation of women in the lighting industry. However, women are under represented in many other areas of the stage and entertainment industry. WiL's - and now WiSE's - aim is to promote career paths for women and offer support, advice and mentorship through a programme of internships and work experience opportunities. The more women we have on board, the more we can offer. We hope these programmes will be well supported by the industry and its associations as a whole."

Paule and I also want to examine how we might stem the huge female brain drain that happens in the industry when women choose to start families. Whilst there are some women who continue to work in lighting and other disciplines after having children - Paule and myself included - no-one would pretend it's an easy choice and most have to change the way they approach work in some way or other. For many, if not most, the long, often antisocial hours, the sporadic and unpredictable nature of freelance work and the relatively low pay make it almost impossible to pursue, in any meaningful way, without relying on good support outside of themselves.

As you can imagine, this subject has been the source of considerable discussion on the WiL networking site.



Screenshots from the Women in Stage Entertainment website -

www.WISEonline.org

Already it's producing valuable feedback relating to the direct experiences of women at different venues in the UK. In response to that, WiSE is also drawing up a list of helpful and family friendly venues, employers and directors in the UK and beyond.

The main focus now is to spread the word, establish WiSE and encourage communication between industry women on the networking site. This will help to highlight and understand the key issues women face in their working careers and enable us to address them in a positive way.

Membership of WiSE is now open to all women working in the stage and entertainment industry, not just those in Lighting. Also much of the website, including the news page, is open to anyone who would care to look. Any woman who applies to be a member of WiSE is automatically invited to join the social networking site.

The organisation is in the process of setting up a steering committee and is looking to recruit a volunteer with experience in grant funding applications. In future, WiSE plans to provide advocacy services to members and build a comprehensive, life-long training programme in association with Vari*Lite trainer Coral Cooper and others.

Constable says: "Our aim is to make the industry a more inclusive and welcoming place for women to work and run businesses in. The best working environment is always one in which there is a healthy balance of men and women. We will therefore continue to encourage more women to consider a career in the backstage disciplines."

WiSE is open to any advice or help other organisations might wish to offer. We are keen to forge links with industry bodies such as ABTT,

ALD, BECTU, Equity, PLASA and STLD and Sphinx, and have opened discussions about training and career development with venues, higher education and schools.

Whilst we have absolutely no intention of advocating bra-burning rallies, there are some serious issues for us to address here. After all, the industry and its associated businesses invest much in the training and development of its female employees. Why then is it perfectly happy to lose them, rather than address inflexible hours or antisocial working conditions? This seems a little short-sighted. We want to help employers and employees see that there is a better, more flexible way forward. Obviously, there will be some who want to leave for their own personal reasons; we certainly don't want to bully women into staying in the industry for the sake of it. But equally there are many who just can't see any other way.

Of course, the benefits of the work WiSE does will not affect women alone. Let's face it, for as far back as we can see there have been issues around the long, antisocial hours freelance workers are expected to work. I know there are many in this industry who are still being asked to work overnight and then work the next day, or are not getting their 11-hour overnight break regularly. It's also not uncommon to find people working six 14-hour days every week, for weeks at a time. For the well-being and sake of all those who work in the entertainment industry there has to be a better, more sustainable way to do business.

> www.WISEonline.org

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> [//members.wiseonline.org](http://members.wiseonline.org)

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