

The Rosco Century

From colored marquee bulbs to LEDs, how one company has kept up with the times for an astonishing ten decades

By: David Barbour

In this industry, when a company lasts long enough to celebrate its silver anniversary, that's cause for comment. When a company last a hundred years, it's simply extraordinary. This year, Rosco marks the completion of its first century as an indispensable supplier of lighting-related products. Even more remarkable is the fact that, in all this time, the company has had only two owners. A glance back at its history, aided by comments from Stan Miller, its owner since 1958, provides a window on how the entertainment lighting industry has changed since the day in 1910, when 24-year-old Sidney Kelsey Rosenstein began selling Colorine, a lacquer for coloring light bulbs used on theatre marquees.

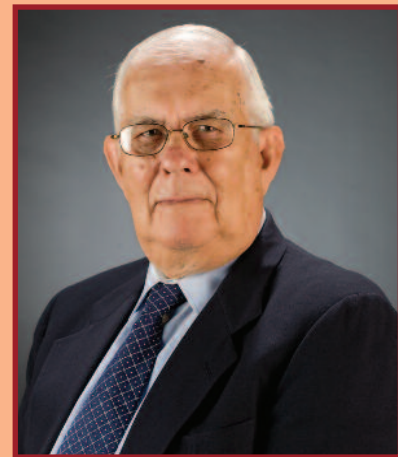
Rosenstein was the "Ros" in "Rosco." The full name was "Rosco Laboratories," a not-entirely accurate term for a company that manufactured Colorine as well as Opaline, a translucent lacquer. Miller now speculates that the use of the word "laboratories" indicated a possible uncertainty on the part of Rosenstein about the company's future direction. He adds that, later on, he attempted to drop the word, but was prevented from doing so by New York State on the grounds that there were already too



An early Rosco catalog, focusing on Opaline. Note the slogan.

many other firms with similar names. In any event, Opaline and Colorine took off commercially, and were soon being delivered in sufficiently large quantities to Manhattan that the company developed the slogan, "We color the night lights of Broadway."

Next, Rosco took what might seem to be a slight detour when it began to manufacture Rosco Film Cement, which was used to splice film in the editing room. The concentration on film-related products continued for some time, leading to the development of such oddities as Roscaroma Spray, a deodorant for photographic darkrooms. However, says Miller, a dual focus on supplying the theatre and film markets was not unusual for the time. "Prior to the late '50s, he notes, "the theatre supply companies had as customers the theatre exhibitors. If you walked into a theatre supply company, there was usually a film projector in the middle of the floor, and they would also stock film



Stan Miller has owned Rosco since 1958.

cement and cleaner and gel."

It was during World War I, however, that the company took a major step toward becoming the Rosco that we know today. The war dried up trade with Europe—a major problem for Broadway electricians because Germany was the main source of theatrical gel. At the request of his customers, Rosenstein enlisted a chemist

friend to develop a process for making gel. (There was Brigham, an American gel manufacturer, but, for whatever reason, Broadway personnel preferred to work with Rosco.) According to a classic Rosco story from this era, in 1919 Rosenstein produced by accident an off-color run of gel. Louis Hartmann, an electrician who worked for the producer David Belasco, saw the gel and experimented with it; he returned to Rosco the next day and asked for more. Rosenstein, who had destroyed most of the run, was baffled by Hartmann's request for "the bastard amber"—and, at that moment, a now-familiar product was born.

For decades after that, says Miller, the company's focus was split into three parts: "one-third film cement, one-third color filters, and one-third Colorine." Increasingly, however, gel became the key element.

By the late '50s, Rosenstein, who still ran Rosco, was getting on in years—and along came Stan Miller. "I knew the company, because I had been a salesman for Allied Chemical, and Rosco Laboratories was one of my accounts. I knew Rosenstein," he says. "He was an old man of 72—I've since changed my perspective on that—and he was kind of sitting on the company at that point. It was only earning about \$72,000 a year. He wanted it to be a family business, but his son was on the faculty at the University of Pittsburgh in the field of crystallography, and that was more interesting to him than making gel. Anyway, I looked at the company and thought, there's more business here." He teamed up with his cousin, Len Kraft, an accountant, and they purchased Rosco in 1958, renaming it Rosco Laboratories, Incorporated.

Miller says that Kraft, who, as an accountant, was inherently conservative, proved to be an ideal partner. Sadly, Kraft died young, at 46, of cancer; however, he left the business in excellent condition, creating a four-



In its early days, Rosco sold to both theatre and film-related customers.

dation for future expansion.

Although he wasn't really of the world of entertainment, Miller now says that, in taking over Rosco, the learning curve wasn't excessively steep, largely because of his experience in sales. "I had done selling before, and I found—and I constantly tell this to the young people on our staff—that Jean Rosenthal and Jo Mielziner didn't want me to tell them how to light their shows; they wanted me to supply, on a

timely basis, the colors that they needed. The same was true, later on, when we got into film. It was probably a blessing that I didn't know how to make a film, and couldn't make suggestions to Gordon Willis or Bill Fraker. They liked me a lot more when I could talk about colored plastic. It was a strength and not a weakness."

As the mention of those celebrated directors of photography in the last paragraph indicates, Rosco, under Miller's leadership, was on the move. In 1959, he set out to redo the confusing numbering system for Rosco colors. ("The red-pink section went 15, 16, 17 red, then 60, 112, 113, and 114 pink," notes Miller.) Then again, the company's products were constantly evolving. Roscolene, introduced in 1955, was made of plastic; it went from being a surface-coat to an extruded, body-colored filter. This was followed in 1970 by Roscolar, a gel coated on a Mylar polyester base, and, in 1976, by Roscolux, a body-colored polycarbonate color filter. (It was renamed Supergel, for overseas sales.) The company says that Roscolux/Supergel is the largest selling medium in the world.

The emphasis on close, consultative interaction with the customers



The old Rosco factory, at 29 Moore Street in Brooklyn, in 1958.



Miller on the job around 1960, two years after he and Len Kraft bought Rosco.

was another key to Rosco's resurgence after a number of sleepy years. For then, as now, Miller insists, the company's success is rooted in "face-to-face and belly-to-belly" contact with its customers. "You know that Woody Allen line that goes 'Ninety-five percent of life is showing up?' The customer, from the professional right down to the high-school level, appreciates the fact that you show up," he says. "In the beginning, after we bought the company, there were still a lot of Broadway shows

using Cinemoid [a product imported by Kleigl]. Then things began to move to Roscolene. I'd call on the stage electricians, standing outside the stage doors, hoping to catch them as they went in and out. After a time, I was invited in, and I'd try to get them to substitute a Cinemoid color in the plot with a Roscolene color. And, of course, I also called on the designers and gave them our swatch books."

Actually, Miller did more than that. Another classic Rosco story: In 1960, the great Abe Feder was designing

the lighting for the musical *Camelot*. At his invitation, Miller visited the designer's studio, bringing with him a variety of color samples. Feder had put together a tiny rig of lights focused on an easel containing Oliver Smith's scenic sketches; using the Rosco gels, he tried various color combinations. As a result, several new Roscolene colors were created, including 841 (Surprise Pink), 843 (Lavender), and 861 (Surprise Blue).

"At the time, Kleigl stocked Cinemoid," says Miller. "He thought he had an exclusive deal until Ed Cook found a way to have Century stock it, too. Then I got Century to stock Rosco and Cinemoid both. Our philosophy always was this: We call on the users and specifiers and then we sell to the dealers, so it's available. That was the way we got our colors used—it was not enough to rely on our distributors to create the demand. You've got to do that work."

And the work paid off, he recalls: "I still remember being at an American Theatre Association convention one August and Jean Rosenthal was speaking. I was in the back of the hall—and she mentioned a Roscolene color. I just grew eight inches—no, a foot—while standing there. She had mentioned a Roscolene color!"

By the late '60s, Rosco gel was turning up on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and other network television broadcasts. (According to Miller, Rosco got a call from Sullivan's production staff when stripped glass color frames, placed over Kleigl 1,000W cyc strips, started exploding: "It was like popcorn popping as the glass broke right around the ground row.") Rosco products began turning up more and more in films, too. Among other things, R282 Chocolate helped to get the sepia look of *The Godfather*, shot by Gordon Willis. Rosco opened a Hollywood office in 1970. The attention to film paid off in 1974 when the Cinegel line was given an Academy Award for technical achievement.



Gel continues to be a key product for the company.



Miller (center) surrounded by members of his staff.

Going worldwide

“In 1973, we decided that the world didn’t end at Coney Island,” says Miller. He’s painting in broad strokes; by the late ‘60s, Rosco had established relationships with agents in the UK, France, Italy, Japan, and Scandinavia. “Actually,” he continues, “in 1968, one of our big breakthroughs was meeting with Richard Pilbrow at Theatre Projects in London. He felt that Roscolene colors were different from Cinemoid. He called them ‘clean colors.’ He thought that Cinemoid was better for drama and Roscolene for musicals and comedies. Theatre Projects became the UK stocker for Roscolene; later, we formed a company in London and hired Michael Hall to run it.”

Next came an initiative to go worldwide. “Dick Glickman, who had been the chief engineer at Colortran, came aboard in 1972,” says Miller. “His job was to travel the world and set up dealers. He was a member of American Society of Cinematographers, and he knew film people around the world; he made a lot of contacts for us.” Today, Rosco covers all continents. “My plan was to have half our revenue come from the international business. Last year, it amounted to 57% of our business.”

This kind of balance is very important, he adds, as economies rise and fall around the globe. For example, he says, “Brazil was down for a couple of years, and now they’re doing really well—they have both the Olympics

and the World Cup coming over the next couple of years. The market is booming and their currency is strong; they don’t know from the recession. You have to watch how the world shifts and changes. We’re one of the few companies I know of that sells significant amounts to China, rather than buying from them.”

Miller takes a similar point of view about the American market; because Rosco’s product line is so broad and its customers so ubiquitous that any risk is spread over the widest possible map. He is also beginning to see glimmers of hope in the troubled economy. “State school budgets have been cut and no state agency has very much money, but the budgets haven’t continued to shrink,” he notes. “Philanthropy is coming back and more money is being donated. Look at the new *Ring Cycle* at the Metropolitan Opera—you have to wonder where the money comes from, and yet it does.”

The story of Rosco in more recent years has been one of constant product diversification. In 1978, the company picked up a German-made fog fluid and started making foggers. In

“After a hundred years, we’re basically selling a brand. It’s not breakfast cereal, but the company is basically a brand. That’s why it’s so important to keep introducing new products—because it enhances the brand, which helps all the products. And, through marketing, we make people realize that Rosco is still out there, still adding products—and, yes, there are still color filters, and Colorine for dipping light bulbs.”—Miller



Litepad, one of Rosco’s newest products, has opened doors in new markets, including architectural lighting.

1984, it earned another Oscar, this time for introducing a safe, oil-free fog fluid. Given the rise of ellipsoidal spotlights, in 1984 Rosco began representing David Hersey Associates, the UK-based gobo manufacturer, in the US. It eventually acquired DHA, and went on to develop such effects gear as the Image Pro, X24, and Iris. In 2010, Rosco acquired The Gobo Factory, a Paris-based maker of custom glass gobos. Other additions to the product line include scenic paints, dance floors, and tapes.

The company has gotten in on the trend for LEDs with Litepad, a slim profile light for film, video, still photography, and architectural applications. "Litepad has us into lighting the Armani Hotel in Dubai—not a job we would normally be involved in," Miller says. "We're getting into architectural lighting because Litepad has led us to that market. We're doing a new product in which we laminate our color gels to make a more rigid

panel for LED units."

This ability to innovate seems to be what has kept Rosco going for ten decades. Mark Engel, president and CEO, who represents the next generation of the company's leadership, says, "New products, such as the LitePad, have made investments in architectural markets more imperative. That's why we initiated Rosco Architectural, a new division staged with specialists in this area." He adds, "Globalization is not just a catchword here; we are leveraging technology with the strength of our culture to create teams of global experts. Our customers work globally, and so do we."

Miller adds, "Think of all the people who would be affected if Rosco ceased to exist. That's really why the new products are important—to continue the brand, and to continue to breathe life into the company."

He also notes that, in spite of the many changes, including the compa-

ny's elaborate website, face-to-face communication is still the key to sales. "We think our customers are important enough to go to, say, Eastern Missouri to do a workshop on scenic paints and filters—and that's why people feels it's worth their time to show up. We have capable people like Jenny Knott, and when she spends a day talking about scene painting, people are pleased and flattered—and they learn something."

"After a hundred years," he says, "We're basically selling a brand. It's not breakfast cereal, but the company is basically a brand. That's why it's so important to keep introducing new products—because it enhances the brand, which helps all the products. And through marketing we make people realize that Rosco is still out there, still adding products—and, yes, there are still color filters, and Colorine for dipping light bulbs." As there may well be for yet another century. 

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