

A Handful of Keys 20 years on - we chat to Hutch

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Jonathan Roxmouth, Roelof Colyn and Ian von Memerty in the 20 year old production

Nobody, least of all it's set and lighting designer Denis Hutchinson, had an inkling that twenty years down the road, *A Handful of Keys* would be South Africa's most successful musical to date, clinching at least nine international awards along the way.

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Ian jumping, Jon at the ivories.

This year the much loved performance, featuring two men behind two grand pianos and a mix of comedy and songs from Elton John to Norah Jones, and The Beatles to Alicia Keys, will celebrate it's twentieth anniversary and will run at the Theatre on the Bay in Cape Town from 9 July to 10 August, and then at Pieter Toerien's Montecasino Theatre in Fourways from 13 August to 5 October.



Denis Hutchinson, LD and Set

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Designer for A Handful of Keys

Hutch was part of the production team right from the start in 1994.

“Bryan Schimmel and Ian von Memerty initially put the show together at the Youth Theatre with Alan Swerdlow directing,” he recalls. “We wondered if we could get through the five week run which we were booked for.”

When the theatre crew started fighting about who would be working on the show – you don’t see that often – Hutch knew something extraordinary was taking place. “We opened, got fantastic reviews and were sold out! Twenty years later we are still doing the show.”

A few minor changes have occurred over the years. For one, the set which featured a giant (7x4m) mirror overhead so that audiences could see the pianists’ hands and the piano mechanisms, was not originally intended for touring, and after four or five years, and numerous knocks and bruises along the way, it was time for a new and more practical touring design. “I still miss the original though.”

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The original set

“The lighting remained identical until last year, and then only changed because the Theatre on the Bay and Pieter Toerien’s Montecasino Theatre had bought new equipment, which meant they no longer had the gear used in the original rig,” explained Hutch. “So out of necessity I had to relight.” The new design is LED driven, and has brought a contemporary facelift to the production in terms of colour. “Although conceptually the show is very similar, the feel is much more contemporary.”

What keeps a show thriving after two decades? Hutch believes it’s a combination of factors. “A lot of people like the piano as an instrument,” he says. “It’s one of the few instruments that can be played solo because you can have both melody and accompaniment at the same time and even more so when there are two instruments. The variety of the music – which ranges from classical through rag time and jazz to pop – is another appeal and of course the personalities of the performers.”

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The simplified version – though Hutch had a soft spot for the original

Over the years the show has had six different casts. This season's showmen include Ian von Memerty (Strictly Come Dancing and SA's Got Talent), Roelof Colyn (currently the MD on Spamalot), and Jonathan Roxmouth (Phantom in Phantom of the Opera, Danny in the international tour of Grease and Gaston in Beauty in the Beast), with different pairings playing venues depending on availability.

"It is a very special show," said Hutch, "and it's been fun to do all around South Africa and in Sydney, London and Dubai as well!"

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Never a dull moment! Jonathan Roxmouth and Roelof Colyn laughing at the piano.