Astera Titans for Tense Lord of the Flies Production

Posted on October 25, 2019

aniel Monks, Justin Amankwah Contessa Treffone, Nyx Calder and Yerin Ha in STC’s Lord of the Flies, 2019. Photo © Zan Wimberley

Copyright © DWR Distribution

Lighting designer Alex Berlage used 36 x Astera Titan Tube battery-powered wireless LED fixtures, each rigged on two individual winches, to produce a range of lighting, location effects, architecture and scenic elements for a compelling and edgy new production of ‘Lord of The Flies’ staged at Roslyn Packer Theatre by the Sydney Theatre Company.

Directed by Kip Williams, the production has been acclaimed for many aspects including its diverse mixed gender 11-person adult cast who brought new energy and insight into William Golding’s tense psychological novel that explores some brutal, uncomfortable and uncompromising issues related to chaos, power and human behaviour.

Alex is a theatrical director as well as a lighting designer and he’s constantly looking at different and more spatial ways to use lighting for building dramaturgic foundations and challenging some of the more traditional rules of lighting.

Copyright © DWR Distribution

The cast of STC’s Lord of the Flies, 2019. Photo © Zan Wimberley

Lord of The Flies presented an ideal opportunity for an alternative and experimental approach that blurred and blended the roles of lighting and space … which enabled the Titan Tubes to help create the scenography.

“The Tubes were almost like cast members,” he explained, “transcending the set, lighting and direction.”

Copyright © DWR Distribution

Each tube was flown on the two individually controlled Orbisfly winches so they could be used to change shape and definition of the space and interact with the cast. Towards the end of the play, eight were unclipped from their catenary flying wires and used as luminous sticks by the cast.

It’s the first time that Alex has utilized Astera products in one of this shows, and the decision came when he, Kip and set designer Elizabeth Gadsby had all decided that a wireless kinetic lighting element would assist in creating the specific desired aesthetic.

They started looking around for suitable options together with Corinne Fish, full-time lighting supervisor for the Sydney Theatre Company and chief LX on Lord of the Flies. It was also the first time that Corinne had worked with Astera.

Her role was working closely with Alex, taking care of all the non-design lighting aspects of the show including managing any hires, managing the lighting budget, running the crew and technical schedules, plus organising, planning and overseeing all rigging / power / data schematics, etc.

Copyright © DWR Distribution

The cast of STC’s Lord of the Flies, 2019. Photo © Zan Wimberley

On this production, Corinne had the additional responsibility of delivering the kinetic system, which involved everything from sourcing appropriate equipment for the budget and ensuring this could meet the design brief.

Chameleon lighting were the main lighting suppliers, so Corinne and Alex gave them a brief for the tubes and winches in terms of what they needed to achieve. This included fixtures bright enough to punch through fully lit scenes, and with enough battery life not just for the two-hour show, but also to last for hours of extended technical rehearsals without having to be recharged

Copyright © DWR Distribution

… and Chameleon came back with some fixture options to consider.

Alex, Corinne and the rest of the creative team then visited Chameleon for a demo session of the various fixtures, and it was here that the Titan Tubes “stood out as the best option” states Corinne.

Alex immediately loved the quality of the Titan Tube output, plus the colours and intensity. As the show lighting started to evolve, he enjoyed changing the rhythm and pace of the action with the Tubes and having the ability to suddenly flip into bright, rich colours or mesmeric flashing and chasing effects, WOW’ing and surprising the audience.

Working with the Titan Tubes was “a thoroughly enjoyable process,” he says. “The more we used them the more we discovered their versatility.”

The kinetic system comprised the 36 Titan Tubes, which were picked up at each end by a total of 72 winches.

Custom brackets were 3D printed for either end of the tube which allowed a more slimline fixing point, and also enabled the Tubes to transition from hanging horizontally to vertically via a 90-degree hinge.

Small clips (similar to carabiners, but easier for the cast to release) were attached to the brackets for the scene where the eight Tubes were unclipped from the winch system.

When attached to the winches, paracord was used to tie them to the clips, extending 9 metres.

Copyright © DWR Distribution

The paracord also tied onto a swivel / weight assembly to counteract twisting or spinning as the Tubes flew in and out vertically. The weight also ensured that the load on the winches didn’t drop below the minimum required to keep tension on the lines. When the tubes went vertical, one of the two pick-ups effectively became a slackline.

The DMX controlled winches were positioned across four house fly lines, with 9 tubes / 18 winches per bar. They were also supplied by Chameleon, and picked for their small size, quiet operation and smooth running.

All the winch positional moves and the Titan Tubes were programmed into the house ETC Gio console by Corinne. As the show was so complex, the general lighting rig was programmed and run an EOS Ti console by Blake Garner, a setup that left Corinne to focus on the Tubes and kinetics.

The whole Tube / Kinetic system was a huge undertaking and a collaboration that took considerable planning, research and testing to eventually arrive at the setup utilised in the show. Set designer Elizabeth was also involved in the imaginative side of how the kinetics were used to enhance the locations for each scene.

Corinne “really enjoyed” using the Titan Tubes. “They are a great, lightweight unit – and worked wonderfully as a solution for this show,” she commented, also impressed with the colours and battery life.

She thought the Titan menus were easy to figure out and synched painlessly to their WDMX transmitters.

Copyright © DWR Distribution

Alex generally loved the adaptability, intensity, colour range and seamless transitions between colours … and says he will definitely be using them again!

For him, lighting the show in this way enabled a physical reinforcement to the highly visceral and hard-hitting narrative presenting the story in an exciting and form-breaking new perspective.

Photos by Zan Wimberley

Copyright © DWR Distribution