

Cats use MA and Robe

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By Richard Neville and Alistair Kilbee



All photos with kind

courtesy of Pat Bromilow Downing

Prior to *Cats* moving off to Artscape in Cape Town, DWR Distribution had the privilege of receiving valuable insight to the production from both Richard Neville, associate lighting designer from Mandylights (Australia), and from local man Alistair Kilbee, who was the South African Technical Director for one of the best loved international musicals recently brought to the Teatro stage at Montecasino, Johannesburg, by Pieter Toerien. *Cats* is run on a grandMA and uses 26 Robe 700s. One immediately recognizes that working on a show with this magnitude and history is something special.

This design has never been seen before in South Africa - *Cats* has evolved to take advantage of

newer technology, and the South African production features LED fixtures and a greater number of moving lights than previous touring productions.



The original lighting design was by David Hersey, with this new associate design by Richard Neville and Greg Yates of

Mandylights. This design was created in 2008 for the South Korean production, which formed the basis for the 2009 South African Production. The local associate designer in South Africa was Denis Hutchinson.

Both Richard Neville and Alistair Kilbee have memories of seeing the show on the West End in London while growing up. “It’s a huge privilege to work on a show like *Cats*. For me, *Cats* was the first show I ever saw on the West End in London when I was a child – I was seven years old and I still remember a lot of experience,” recalls Richard. “To get an opportunity twenty years later to re-light the show is fantastic, as was the chance to join with the rest of the amazing production and creative team. It’s also a little daunting – the show is one of the best known musicals in the world so a huge number of people have very high expectations of it, so it has been a challenge to try and introduce some new elements while remaining faithful to the original design, look and feel of the show.”

Comments Alistair, “This is my first time working on a production of *Cats*, however, I have always liked *Cats* after I saw it for the first time in the West End as a teenager. The production is still the same after all the years, except for the lighting which has been modernized in the last few years to make use of more moving lights and reduce the time the production takes to set up.” *Cats* was produced in South Africa by Pieter Toerien eight years ago.

Following the UK Design

The SA production – like every other production of *Cats* in the world – has to remain true to the original lighting design. There are certain elements of the show such as the gobos that cover the set, the glowing tyre lights, cats eyes and moon that are instantly recognisable and are as much a part of the look of the show as the set or the costumes.

When Mandylights started working on the production last year, they flew to New York to meet David Hersey to discuss many of his original concepts when he first lit *Cats* in 1981. “We also took the time to go back through photos, videos and plots from various productions from the show’s history to pick out what we liked and didn’t like. As a result, this new design features many of the original elements including gobos, lighting positions and certain visual looks of the

original production, but with a bit of creative license that today's technology gives us," says Richard.



One particular element – the ‘rainbow’ of lights that appears in the sky as Grizabella ascends to the Heaviside Layer – was something that David had used in the original London production, but had since disappeared from other touring and installed productions. He mentioned that he’d like to see it again, so Mandylights put it back in which was great to be able to do.

“One of the most vivid memories I have of *Cats* in the New London Theatre is the immersive environment of the junkyard – there were lights and set junk all the way around the theatre,” tells Richard. “We’ve brought some of that back by hanging about 60 fixtures throughout the auditorium which project gobos all over the seats and the walls – it’s all about trying to involve the audience from the start and trying to convince them that they’re a part of the massive junkyard, rather than just sitting watching a show that is confined to the stage. The show’s direction sees the cats continually moving through the house, so it’s only natural that the lighting should follow them out.

“The show has, and always will be, a very dark show. Almost every fixture lighting the stage from the front uses breakup gobos so the cats are always moving in and out of shadows. *Cats* begins in almost total darkness – at the midnight hour in fact – and in the opening moments of the show it’s almost impossible to distinguish the cats from their surroundings. It’s been a challenge to balance the required darkness with the need for everyone to see what’s going on, but I think it’s incredibly important to retain this visual element and we’ve tried hard to keep it looking like a junkyard the whole way through.

He adds, “All that said and done, there are several things we’ve added – by putting the LED in the set we’ve been able to extend the colour schemes of each scene off the stage and into the scenery. There are some other subtle installations that add detail around the place – things like gobo rotators on the clouds, a great deep blue glow that emanates from the back of the set, and shards of light that pierce over the back wall of junk are just a few examples of the additions.”

Robe Fixtures

Richard says he has kept his eye on the Robe fixtures for a few years and has been looking forward to using them in a theatrical environment for some time. “They’re reliable, have great colours and a very smooth dimming curve which is essential in a show where there are a lot of long fade times.

“In *Cats*, the 26 Robe washes are incredibly exposed to the audience – they form a huge line that completely wraps around the set – so it’s vital that they are reliable and that every fixture looks the same. It took a while to tweak all the fixtures so they all behaved exactly the same, but I think we got there in the end.

“We’ve fitted top hats to all of the Robe fixtures which are all made by Robe, so installation was really easy and I think they work well.

“The one thing I’ve found with Robe all over the world is the incredible support that is offered by both the distributors and the company itself. So many manufacturers distance themselves from



their dealers but with Robe, regardless of where I work in the world, there seems to be genuine interest in the product and productions that they're working on, which creates an amazing level of support. It's been an absolute pleasure to work with the SA dealers.

Control Desk

"I'm a huge fan of the GrandMA consoles and have been for a few years. It's incredibly versatile, rock solid in its operations and networking and very well supported all over the world.

"In 2007 we reprogrammed the Asian touring production of *Cats* from Hog onto GrandMA, so it was a natural choice to program this new production from scratch on the MA.

"I think one of the biggest selling points of the MA system is the fact that you can easily move between the different sizes of consoles – we programmed and rehearsed using a full size, then moved to a light for day-to-day operations which saves the producers money on a long show run – something that always goes down well.

"Recently, I've been really impressed with the iPhone / iPod remote. During dress rehearsals, I can sit anywhere in the theatre to watch the show and take notes – I just keep my iPod with me which lets me keep an eye on the cues and operation. I like being able to make little adjustments to fade times, cue names, etc on the fly too.



Lighting Equipment

Intelligent Fixtures

29 x Martin Mac2000 Profile

9 x Martin Mac2000 Performance

26x Robe 700 Wash with top hats

24x RGB LED Floods

3x Martin Atomic Strobe

32x Chroma Q Cascade Scrollers

2x Martin QFX 150 Fibre Sources



5 x Apollo Power Supplies

Conventionals

206 x ETC Source 4 fixtures, varying beam angles

56x Pars of assorted lenses

12x 1kW Cyc Cells

Spots

3x Lycian 3k Xenon Spots

2x Strand Beamlights

2 Source Four Animation Units

Effects

8x Police Beacons

80x (approx) custom Cats Eye boxes

300m of custom made festoon looms

100x (approx) egg strobes

Atmospherics

2x Unique Hazers

2x Unique Viper Fog Machines

3x Jem Glaciator Low Fog Machines

Dimming

14 x ETC 24CHN Dimmers

Control

1x grandMA Console

1 x grandMA Lite

2 x NSP



Rigging

One of the most impressive elements of the lighting rig is the enormous custom built circle-truss that hangs centred above the stage. “We had this truss made for us for the 2008 Korean production when we originally designed this production,” explains Richard. “The design of the choreography, staging and story of *Cats* is all very circular – dances grow in and out of the centre of the stage, the pod descends to the centre, and a lot of the story refers to the idea of what we call the ‘circle of life.’ Therefore, we set out to create a lighting design that could follow this circular theme. It’s the first time that *Cats* has seen such a design and the truss layout always ensures that there are ‘circles’ of lights visible in the lighting rig.”

Adds Alistair, “We have two 12m side trusses and one 15m back truss that make a box around the set. All 26 of the Robe 700 are rigged on the side and back truss with the Mac 2000 on the circle doing the Gobo work.”

Programming

“We actually did about 80% of our initial programming in our design studio in Sydney. Using ESP Vision, we built the entire venue, complete with automated scenery, textures and the shape of the theatre in 3D,” said Richard. “We initially spent about three weeks building the initial cue structure and looks which was able to significantly reduce the amount of time we spent in the theatre and the number of late nights we had trying to program around rehearsals!”

Favourite Part of the Show

DWR Distribution asked both Richard and Alistair to tell us their favourite part of the show.

“I have two favourite parts of the show... the overture is full of lighting and visual moments where you get genuine audience reactions of surprise, amazement and wonder,” said Richard. “I always enjoy it when previews start and I get to sit in the house and hear people’s reactions to the opening of the show.

“Secondly, the *Jellicle Ball* sequence at the end of Act I is fantastic. It’s spectacular and the action on stage and in the lighting rig runs the full gamut from intimate scenes through to a wild party.

It gives us a chance to make the lighting really react to the music and I think it's my favourite looking sequence in the show. It's loud, sounds great, the uniform choreography is stunning and the lighting is rocking along with every change in the music - it's one of those well known musical theatre moments that is just awesome to watch, and even better to be a part of!"

Alistair's favourite is the Journey to the Heaviside layer. "This is the most technical part of the production, when the large Tyre lifts Grizabella and Old Deuteronomy up over the stage to meet the Heaviside pod that comes down from the Automation Bridge 12m above the stage. This part in the production is the most spectacular and relies on a number of skilled crew members to create the effect. It is always fun to hear people in the auditorium trying to work out how the tyre lifts...it looks like it is really floating."

T.S. Eliot, when writing a book of poems titled "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats", had no idea that Andrew Lloyd Webber would turn his work into a musical celebration that has thrilled audiences for over twenty years and with the input of new technology, will just keep getting better and better if at all that is possible.

A special word of thanks to Richard and Alistair for really going into such detail and taking the time to provide the necessary information requested to create this story.