

Collective Works shines their light on the next generation of designers



Joshua Cutts and Christopher Bolton of Collective Works

-Article with kind courtesy of Nicole Barnes, Pro-Systems

Prominent South African lighting design duo, Joshua Cutts and Christopher Bolton of Collective Works, delivered their first ever three-day training workshop titled: Designing with Light: A Way of Thinking in February. *Pro-Systems Africa News caught up with Cutts and Bolton at the DWR Distribution offices in Johannesburg during the course to discuss the project.*

There is a lot of discussion about the importance of skills development and knowledge transfer as an intervention to deal with the skills shortages and soaring rate of unemployment that continue to plague South Africa. In my experience, discussions that open with statements such as these often result in a whole lot of talk and not very much action. It was, therefore, extremely inspiring to see Joshua Cutts and Christopher Bolton of Collective Works standing before an enraptured class of young lighting designers, all relishing the opportunity to learn about professional lighting design from those who are currently at the very top of their game.

From the box to the classroom

According to Cutts, the Designing with Light: A Way of Thinking workshop in its current form has its roots in 'The Black Box' which featured at Mediatech Africa 2017. The demo space, which proved to be one of the highlights of the 2017 edition of the show, served as an experimental show and visual design space conceived by Christopher Bolton, Joshua Cutts and Bradley Hilton of Collective Works in conjunction with Mediatech show director, Simon Robinson.

The concept for the Black Box emanated from a conversation between the Collective Works team and Robinson at the Prolight+Sound trade show in Frankfurt earlier in the year. "While in Frankfurt, we saw a collaborative demonstration and decided to try to do something similar for the South African market," Robinson states.

Cutts and Bolton put together three interactive presentations for Media Tech, which focused on how to manage the logistical and business side of a lighting design agency, how to manage console workflows and how to programme a Cue-Stack using a lighting control desk. "It was during Media Tech that I realised how hungry young talent in the industry is for knowledge," explains Bolton. "Having identified the need, Joshua and I set about expanding the content of the initial three sessions into a comprehensive three-day training programme."

Reflecting on the development the course content, both Cutts and Bolton state that they have learned a great deal as a result of the process. “When delivering on project after project, one gains an enormous amount of knowledge through experience,” states Bolton. “While developing the more than 450 slides that make up the course content, I spent a lot of time taking some very technical and complicated processes and breaking them down into simple, easy to teach concepts. As a result, I have refined a lot of my own thinking about how we achieve what we do,” reveals Bolton.

Joshua concurs, stating that: “I have never been in an environment where I received formal training, having learned most of what I know on the job. I have, therefore, grown enormously from taking all of the knowledge that is in my head, gained through years of experience, and formalising it so that we are able to share these insights with the next generation of lighting designers.”

When asked about their vision for the Designing with Light: A Way of Thinking course, Cutts and Bolton are very clear in what want to achieve. “We wanted to create a platform to impart our knowledge to the next generation of lighting designers,” states Cutts. “When my time is over, I want to leave behind a legacy, knowing that there is ample talent to drive the industry forward.”

Outside of The Black Box sessions that the pair delivered in July last year, this is the first time that either of them has stepped into the shoes of the trainer. However, if a passion to share knowledge is the defining characteristic of a good teacher – both Cutts and Bolton receive full marks.

A New Way of Thinking

Arguably, one of the many things that set both Cutts and Bolton apart in the lighting design industry is their understanding of the processes that need to be followed to pull off a world-class production in an emerging market economy.

“We have to be realistic about the fact that we live in Africa,” Bolton declares. “We have amazing talent in this country, but like it or not, you will never get to work with the same size production budget that you see in more developed economies. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that lighting designers in South Africa know how to sweat their resources.” Cutts agrees, explaining that one of the most important elements in delivering shows for his clients is getting the most out of what is available through meticulous planning and innovative design.

These are some of the fundamental principles upon which Cutts and Bolton have built the content of their course. Both appreciate that lighting design is a technical craft and, therefore, understand that experiential learning is the primary vehicle to ensure effective skills transfer.

“We have included a lot of theoretical information on console workflows, colour theory, music appreciation and production design to name a few. However, the most important element of our interaction with the trainees is providing them with the opportunity to learn and then do,” states Bolton.

Cutts uses a selection of high profile shows that he has worked on as case studies, such as the most recent SA Idols final among others, and breaks them down, from the initial drawings to the video content of the final production. “I gave the group the measurements of the venue for The Voice SA and asked them to draw their own trussing designs, based on the principals that we had discussed. It was amazing to see how many of the trainees came up with drawings that were very similar to the design that was implemented,” Cutts points out. “For me, this is the best way to assess the efficacy of the training. After the students have listened to what we have to say, they are able to implement that knowledge in a practical and tangible way,” concludes Cutts.

From the classroom to the world stage

Both Joshua Cutts and Christopher Bolton are recognised as exemplary lighting designers, not only locally but

on the international stage. It is a rare occurrence to find a talent that is both at the top of their industry as a practitioner and, at the same time, is a skilled teacher. Somehow, both Cutts and Bolton have developed this unique set of skills. As a result of the success of the inaugural edition of the Designing with Light: A Way of Thinking workshop, the team have attracted international attention – which may develop into the opportunity to take the course to Singapore, among other locations in the years to come.

“There are very few in the industry, except perhaps legends such as Patrick Woodroffe and Roland Greil, who have the maturity to share their knowledge at the risk developing a junior that could potentially become a competitor in the future,” states Duncan Riley, managing director of DWR Distribution. However, Joshua simply laughs this statement off, declaring that: “I’ll keep my job by constantly working to be better at what I do, not by stunting the growth of others.”

It is not surprising that Cutts and Bolton have both attracted an entourage of mentors over the years, resulting in the emergence of some of South Africa’s greatest rising stars in the lighting design industry. The 22 students who encountered this remarkable team will, without doubt, take a lot away from the interaction. I would argue that the learning is not confined to the technicalities of outstanding lighting design, but also to integrity, humility and generosity – values that are in higher demand than ever in our country at this time.

“The guys are absorbing information. It’s my first proper training. Less nervous on day three. People like the interactivity, how we do the larger shows, how we programme, they enjoyed going through the drawings.

Feedback from delegates was great:

“The amount of information was useful and the information we have gained here will make our industry, back in Zimbabwe, better as well.”

It has been beneficial. I saw Chris and Josh at the Black Box stand at Mediatech and what I gathered was that they had a lot more knowledge to share but limited time. I really find this course one of the better ones I’ve attended.”

There has been so much information and it has made me realize how very little I know, to be honest! It’s was awesome listening to Josh and Chris.”

“Very informational – have learnt a lot!”