

Denis Hutchinson American International School



Daniel Dube, Rob Young, Philemon Sewela, Cedric Ramwela and John Phiri

A new auditorium, which will serve as both a theatre and meeting point for assemblies and award evenings, has been built at The American International School of Johannesburg (AISJ). Theatre consultant Denis Hutchinson was on board both architecturally and for the technical specifications.

On the theatre lighting side, DWR Distribution was responsible for the supply of all the cabling and the data network for the equipment which includes an MA Lighting dot2 console, Philips Strand Lighting 6 Pack dimmer, 2 Strand Relay Racks and 10 Robe Robin DLX Spots. Furthermore DWR's Rob Young and his team designed and installed a flying system, retractable seating for the Orchestra Pit and two hand operated curtain tracks. Philips Strand Lighting 6 Pack

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Denis Hutchinson and Dave Whitehouse of DWR

Whilst in the United States on another project, Denis came across something that triggered the idea of making the theatre a completely LED lighting installation. "There are many advantages to going the LED route including not having to change lamps, lower power requirements, no gels, all things schools often struggle with," he says.

“Until now, the quality of LED units has not really been good enough for facial light, but with the arrival of a new generation of units which have good colour rendering, decent fade curves and affordability, that situation has totally changed.” The school was totally behind him.

LED changes the cable infrastructure. “One of the things I suddenly realized, because of the way the better LED lamps are designed, is that I don’t need a single 16Amp BS socket anywhere in the building. I can do everything on Powercon, and the great joy of putting everything onto Powercon, is that nobody can plug a vacuum cleaner in or the urn or anything else... we’ve all had our systems blown because of that! Also, there’s much less likelihood of nicking an extension cable that is Powercon to Powercon than there is of nicking an extension cable that is 16Amp to Janus as you can’t use it for anything else.”

In future installations an option for Denis will be the recent arrival of combined power and DMX cables. “They’re a little bit costly at present but having just gone through this experience, it will make the cabling simpler and less messy because you are running one cable instead of two every time. The fact that we didn’t have it for the American School when we did the installation is not important. The point is that we’ve been able to put in an installation where we are able to lock off 80% of the rig giving the school a basic system in whatever colour they choose; there is a back light system, a high cross light system, front light and a cyc.”

There are also ten units that are intended to be refocussed as needed. “Obviously they could refocus the whole rig if they wanted to, but as it stands it has given them instant light for almost anything they need to do.” Ten Robin DLX Spot moving heads, also LED, provide a whole range of other possibilities. “It’s a very nice little installation,” said Denis.



When it came to control, a chance remark at a site meeting by one of the drama teachers who had bemoaned their existing lighting console as being dreadful, caught Denis’ attention. “I asked him what desk it was, and he told me saying it was way too complicated. And I went, oops, that’s not a complicated control desk, but it suddenly made me realise that what I consider a complicated control desk and what people who don’t have my background consider a complicated desk, are two different animals.”

With this in mind Denis organised a control console shoot out, very deliberately, not for his own benefit but for the teachers and pupils of the school, which turned out incredibly valuable. “The whole point was to find out which desk appealed to them,” he explained. “Because I had quotes on three desks, all three of which met spec and could have done the job, for me it was six of one and half a dozen of the other; I could work on all three. But it was really interesting seeing what happened when you put teachers and pupils with the three desks and the

way they responded to them. “

There was a very clear response. “One of the desks they really didn’t like, and they had some reservations about the other. The third, which was the MA dot2, they fell in love with partially, I have to add, because of the free off-line editor which, and this is something that had never occurred to me, they saw as being a really good educational tool. I never thought of an off-line editor in those terms. And they, because of what they do for a living, went, ‘we can use this in the classroom.’ That more than anything else, is what actually made them cross over.”

“What we created was a situation where the school could intuitively choose their own control and I knew whichever one they selected would serve them and could be backed up. Having watched the training given to the teachers and students by DWR’s Gareth Chambers, they have all managed to take on the basics quite easily, which is crucial. The school now has the situation where there are half a dozen pupils and teachers who can bring up channels and record a state at the very least. They’ve also got one wiz kid whose who is doing things that MA don’t even know the board can do – you have to love teenagers!

“The school appears to be very happy with their choice, which is the important thing. I was involved with the opening ceremony, just to guide them, and also saw their first production of *Suessical – The Musical* which they did with no interference from me. They did a very good job.”



Philips Strand Lighting 6 Pack

A Philips Strand Lighting 6 Pack dimmer was added to the install, mainly because in the school’s other little theatre they have conventional generics and Denis wanted to give them the option of bringing gear across should they have a particularly large show or if somebody else came in with gear. It enables them to run some conventionals and there is enough power to put in an extra rack if need be, but so far the school team have worked entirely on the rig and the new technology provided to them, which for Denis is fantastic.



Daniel Dube and Philemon Sewela from DWR

On the manufacturing side, Rob Young from DWR came up with a few solutions. “The auditorium does not have a full fly tower but they did want fly bars and Rob designed a system which gives them 11 motorised bars,” explained Denis. “They are very simple stop and start bars, and they don’t have automated deads or variable speeds, but they are basically there to be able to drop a bar in, attach a piece of scenery and take it out again. The entire lighting rig, by the way, is accessible from purpose designed walkways so that the venue is effectively a ladder free environment.”



Motorised winch units



Fly Bars



Patch Panel

For the orchestra pit, Rob designed retractable seating. Denis explains, “We didn’t have the money for an orchestra lift and as is typical with most schools, they wanted the maximum number of seats for assemblies and graduations and fewer for theatre productions. The school’s pit is deliberately quite shallow because while in a professional theatre you tend to hide the musicians, when you’re talking a school theatre the parents need to be able to see their children so visibility becomes important.



Motor control board for Fly Bars

What we ended up with in the pit is two rows of seating which are mounted on a motorised truck. Collapse the seats and the whole truck can then slide under the stage creating an orchestra pit; when no pit is needed, the extra seats are there.

I have worked with Rob Young for years and get on like a house on fire. We have our moments because I always ask him to do things that are slightly impossible and I think he always rises to the challenge. Between us we seem to have managed to solve most of the problems and that's great."

The American School now has a totally up to date technical installation. For Denis the project has enabled him to think differently about future lighting installs and he is looking forward to the next one.



