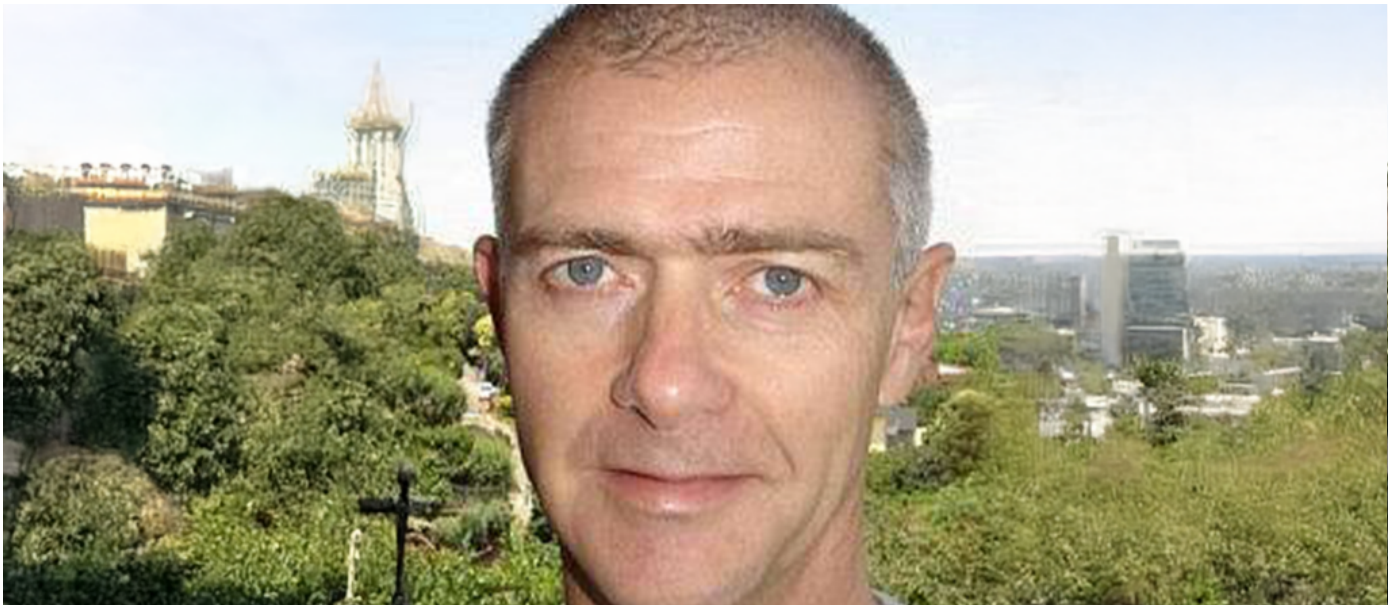

Denis Hutchinson

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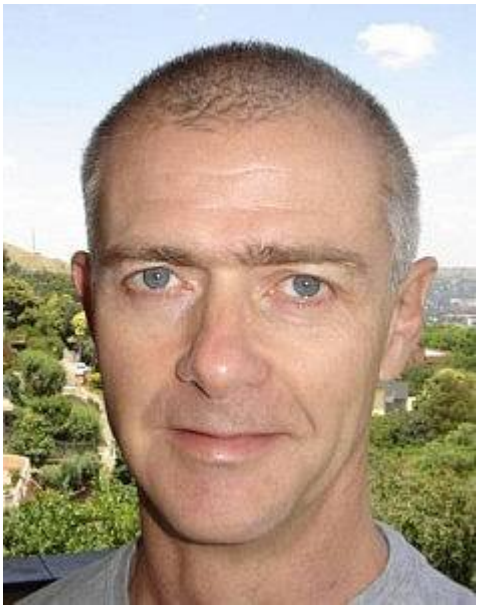

Independent, honest, straight down the line and a gentleman through and through are words that describe eminent lighting designer Denis Hutchinson, known as “Hutch” by his friends.

He was schooled in South Africa and his interest lay from aeronautic engineering to psychology. “The thing I never thought of was probably the thing I’d have been good at and that’s architecture,” Denis says. “Architectures loss was theatres gain. Or should that be the other way around?”

While many famous sports stars follow in their father’s footsteps – one only has to think of cricketers Graeme and Shaun Pollock, rugby stars Ruan and Geysie Pienaar, the Senior and Junior Schalk Burgers or even now recently in South African music, Johnny and Jesse Clegg – Denis stepped out of the mould, his dad being the successful golfer, also Denis Hutchinson, and achieved distinction in his own field..

His early years were magical as Denis and his mother travelled along with his dad on the European and South African Golf Tours – chasing after summer. Denis says to this day he does not do winter very well! “Being ‘on tour’ I grew up surrounded by adults,” he recalls. “Only when I started school did I come into contact with kids my age.” Because he literally grew up in hotels, he tours easily but did, however, miss out on certain things. “Balls skills were skipped,” he smiles. “You can’t catch and throw in hotel rooms and I’m not a great golfer either!” Yet this unconventional start, produced an eloquently spoken young boy, confident, passionate and with a background that would compliment his interest in the arts.

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At age ten, Denis lit his first show. “Very badly, I have to add,” says Denis. “I think it was more a fascination with the switches but that was the start.” It was for a school play and Denis focussed four lanterns. This led him to read up on the subject with a continued interest throughout his school career. Ironically, having signed up to light ‘Twelfth Night’ when he was in Standard 6 (grade 8), he got dragged into auditions and was eventually told that he could light the show, if he was also prepared to play the role of Feste. “My first taste of emotional blackmail in the theatre!” Throughout his high school years he bugged all the theatres like the Alex and His Majesty’s in Johannesburg and helped out on weekend set-ups. “I worked for free in Standard 9 and 10, but as a means of learning it seemed the obvious thing to do. And there was a payoff – I got to know people in the industry and got offered my first paid job just after I’d finished matric. I was asked to take over the Stage Electrics for “The Great Waltz” at the Civic while the normal guy was on leave. They paid me the princely sum of R45 per week.”

A Handful of Keys – the new touring version (set & lighting)

That was a far cry compared to the salary paid at what Denis calls “Uncle PW’s Holiday Camp for Wayward Boys”, otherwise known as the army. Doing his basics at Heidelburg and posted in Cape Town he was paid R28 per month. “The army did give me a uniform, board and lodging,” he jokes. And during this 18 month period he managed to light a few shows for amateur companies in Cape Town

In the army Denis presented training on how to fix radar. “I ended up having a good time and thoroughly enjoyed it,” he recollects. “I taught in both languages and in the last course only in Afrikaans. Ironically I

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have only worked in Afrikaans in the theatre twice in the last thirty years. I always thought this a great pity." His first engagement after the army was the Afrikaans version of "Boeing Boeing" with Frans Marx, who back then was still an actor. "Egoli hadn't been thought of and I was employed as the ASM. When the Stage Manager fell ill, I became the Stage Manager.

He then worked for the Circus Osler which played 14 shows a week at the old arena in Johannesburg and thereafter he was employed by Joan Brickhill and Louis Burke from His Majesty's on their production of 'Grease'. "We did rock and roll on a Grand Master… it's the most fun you can have on a lighting board," says Denis. "It's hard to explain but it's a real manual board and two of us used arms, hands, knees and elbows for complex lighting." Denis recalls that the board made use of two operators. "We used to sweat more than the dancers!"

When the production moved to the Nico Malan (now Artscape) in Cape Town, the lighting had to be transferred onto a (then) brand new MMS control desk. "We had to cut cues because there were things the desk couldn't do. It was only one cue at a time, and if you wanted to do multiple timings… well, you couldn't."

A Handful of Keys, the original version (set & lighting)

Denis says that it's easy to forget how this industry has developed over the years. "I grew up with the Pattern 23 which was the Source Four of its day. The idea of moving lights was virtually the stuff of science fiction," he says. "While there was a colour change mechanism in the early 30s, a moving light was a

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followspot. The earliest moving lights I can recall were some fresnels from the early 70s which could only pan, tilt and focus. Back then only the big German theatres could think of using them and there certainly weren't any to be seen in South Africa."

"Real Moving Lights really started with the early Vari*Lite developed for one of the early Genesis tours and it was a good ten years or so before they arrived here and even then they were only used for rock concerts, because of the noise they generated. The first moving light that was really good for theatre was the VL5. It was a quiet fixture and had a degree of accuracy – and sadly never made it to these shores – at least not into our theatres."

Technologically today, it's a whole new ball game with moving lights the norm and video steadily working alongside. And with all the toys Denis believes SA designers are much underrated. "Almost without exception we work with a smaller budget and less gear, yet produce results," he says. "In a lot of areas overseas designers are spoilt for choices which is a problem we certainly don't have. Of course I don't know if I'd know what to do with all of that extra if I had it!"

Umoja – Shaftsbury Theatre London (set & lighting)

That said Denis would still like to find a show to light with one lamp. For him he'd rather light Shakespeare than play with all the toys. It's the verbal moments, the use of language, that has moved him most in theatre and some of his most vivid theatrical memories happened in the rehearsal room without any of the 'extras'. "It's all about the performance and the way in which the audience are involved. The real things are

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important, the raw emotions. All too often the drama can be swamped by extraneous effects."

Denis keeps up with technology but does not want technology for technology sake. "There is some awesome new technology, but I'm not sure that the theatre – where I spend most of my time – is not going to head in the direction of simplification even with the use of new toys. I think the strength in theatre often lies in simplicity and allowing the audience to use their imagination."

Lighting aside, the love of words in scripts have kept Denis going and staying in the industry through the years. Outside the work place he enjoys travelling, scuba diving and used to do sky diving. "I love going to the movies, listening to music (usually older than I am!) and reading… In fact I will read just about anything including the backs of cereal packets!

With all this said, one would imagine Denis to be a real home maker, arty, creative and his dwelling place to be something you'd page through in a home magazine. "For me home is about comfort and being able to relax. I look at beautifully decorated homes, and they are gorgeous but I'd be too scared to put my feet up on the coffee table and that's so not me!"

E-mail Address: denishutch@gmail.com

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