Dreamgirls wow South Africa

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The international award winning Broadway musical, Dreamgirls, produced by Hazel

Feldman of Showtime Management recently opened at the Teatro at Montecasino, Johannesburg and is then moves to Artscape, Cape Town in June. We asked Alistair Kilbee, Managing Director and workhorse from Gearhouse Splitbeam for comment on his involvement in this active, ever rotating and vibrant set… which is anything but child's play. Congratulations to the entirely South African cast and technical crew who have done a tremendous job.

1. A lot of the gear for Dreamgirls was provided by UK based rental company White Light. How easy is it bringing equipment into the country and then having the back-up for the kit?

The Lighting rig came from White Light, and they have a very good reputation and have worked with Showtime Management (the producers of Dreamgirls) before on other productions. Bringing equipment in for a production is always tricky, but it is all about back-up at the end of the day. As Splitbeam is handling the technical management of the production, it makes things a bit easier and through our relationship with DWR we keep all the equipment working. White Light have been very professional and have supplied a number of spare units and also have sent parts as and when needed. With a lighting rig as large as this there is always going to be something going wrong, but it is all about getting the spare units up and running in the shortest time possible.

2. What was Splitbeam's involvement?

Splitbeam supplied Rigging, IT, Lighting Extras, Lighting Operator (Clement Makama) and Technical Director (Alistair Kilbee). In addition, we supplied 44 CM motors and 104way controllers for the rigging of the automation mother truss. We also supplied some additional Vari-lites, and all the IT systems for the production weeks where we had MA software running on laptops and over 12 monitors running MA cue lists.

3. **What made the show different to other shows you've worked on?**

Dreamgirls has a very modern set design which makes this show the most technologically

advanced of any theatre show that I have ever worked on. The flying/rotating LED screens work on a state-of-the-art automation system, which also drives the deck tracks for the clear Plexiglas tables. The LED screens fly in and out and rotate to create different looks on the stage. This all hangs from the grid on a 18 ton mother truss with independent motor drives built in, all of which are run on fibre optic cable. In addition to the mother truss, there are 6 lighting trusses running up and down stage which have 4 lighting “pods” hanging independently 20ft below them, making a grid of 24 “pods.” This leaves space for the LED screens to fly up into the grid anywhere on stage without hitting the lights.

4. What were the challenges in regard to these differences.

The biggest challenge on this production was the rigging (supplied by Splitbeam). All the rigging points had to be within 10mm of the rigging plot to stop all the trusses clashing as they move. There are 5 main support trusses (part of the mother truss) for the LED screen and 6 lighting trusses hanging between them for the lighting “pods.” The clearance between the trusses can be as little as 50mm which is not much when flying LED trusses up and down at high speed (1.6m per second).

5. Because of the differences will it be difficult, technically, to move around? The show is due for Cape Town.

It is always difficult to take a show like this to the next venue as things are set to very high standards in the first venue and have to be just as good in the next venue and often in a much shorter load-in time.Denis Hutchison is our local associate lighting designer and he has been hired to move the show, from a lighting point of view, to Cape Town, (he also programmed the show for the international design team for the Johannesburg load-in). It is always great to work with Denis as he is very particular about every detail of a production. This makes my job so much easier as I know that the lighting will be identical to the Johannesburg season when we open in Cape Town.

6. The networking seemed quite a challenge. I believe it included the networking of

various control systems and was very involved. If this has not been covered in your answers above, you are welcome to elaborate.

The networking setup was quite involved and very detailed. The job of setting this up was given to Nasim Bismilla from Splitbeam and Nick Britz from DWR Distribution. There were different positions for the lighting operator, video operator, video designer, lighting programmer, associate lighting designer and lighting designer; each with two or more monitors. At each position they wanted to be able to view the cue lists during the programming sessions. The video signals were split from the main console and sent through all these positions via ethernet.We ran MAnet to the nsp's back stage via Ethernet and then distributed DMX to the rig. The show file was being viewed and edited by the MA light, MA Full Size and 3 Laptops running MA on PC.

7. How was your relationship with the overseas production team and did they find any difference with our local workmanship compared to what they're used to in the States and other countries?

It is always interesting to work with people from different parts of the world. In some ways South Africa is right up there with them and on other things we are still years behind. I have always believed that you can and should always have an open mind and learn as much as possible from them, however I always get on best with people that come to South Africa with an open mind. If they can take just one thing back to the US with them, then I feel that we have done our bit. It is great for our crew to see how they work and get as much from it as possible, as this will always help our productions of the future.

8. From an audience perspective the show seems extremely precise in terms of technicality. Was it or was that just the impression trhe show gives?

The show and the automation system is very precise. We have to fly the LED screens in at speed and stop just 25mm from the deck with no bounce. The screens often fly in over the cast's heads and need to be moved at the exact time so as not to hit the cast as they walk down stage under them, so all the automation cues are done to the tenth of a second and are accurate to the millimeter. Even the lighting is very precise. Sometimes the VL3000 are irised in to a beam that is only head size on a performer and we need to hit the performer spot on every night. While this

type of accuracy is easily achievable for the light, it can be very hard for the performer as the slightest wrong move can leave them in darkness.