

Full Drama for Idols South Africa

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The challenges of producing entertainment in the pandemic has seen some incredible imagination and resourcefulness from the industry in creating Covid-safe working environments so at least some sectors have been able to keep working, one of which is television.

In Pretoria, South Africa, the State Theatre's 640-seat Drama Stage hosted the rounds and finale of the 2020 Idols SA, complete with a lighting design by Joshua Cutts of Visual Frontier and technical production delivered by Dream Sets for SIC Entertainment. This sixteenth series was directed by Gavin Wratten.



While the show would normally decamp to the 3000-capacity Carnival City Big Top Arena in Johannesburg for the finale, this year everything remained at the State Theatre, and while accommodating a strictly limited audience of 250, the visual elements of the production were also expanded to add some serious WOW factors!

Like any LD asked to add more lights, Josh jumped at the chance to seriously pimp up the rig with an additional 120 Robe moving lights for the finale which was broadcast live on the Mzansi Magic CH 161 on DSTV as usual.



Josh has lit the finals - where the last 10 contestants are whittled down to two - for the last 10 seasons, so part of his 11th edition challenge was to make it dramatically different from before. Then, without the move to the larger venue, his key task was to create a signature visuality for the finale and help ensure that fans watching would still enjoy a great value experience.

In addition to the fantastic house band which had been present through the series under the musical direction of Kurt Herman, Tima Reece and Llewellyn George, an array of aerial performers were also added for the finale, giving Josh some extra interesting elements to light, which he really relished!

The Idols Live Show rig – which features a lot of Robe luminaires – was utilised for the rounds and in the process, Josh had developed an aesthetic more defined with a combination of soft lights, some pixel programmable fixtures and PARs, so he decided to change up the space with extreme beam power!

He needed fixtures with the latitude to produce a plethora of stunning and mind-blowing beamy looks and sequences!

Twenty-four Robe MegaPointes were loaded onto six custom-built dollies which could be wheeled around the stage and positioned anywhere to instantly create different architecture and structural looks which were awesome for the wide shots and those from the back of the auditorium.

MegaPointe is one of Josh's favourite design tools, "The more I use them, the more I like them and still find new effects," he commented. "It's an outstanding beam / spot light source, with the colour mixing adding another whole level."

Twenty-four ESPRITES (with the TRANSFERABLE LED ENGINE) joined the finale, which Josh was keen to use because they are new technology. These were flown above the stage and in the side wings, unleashing another layer of lighting.



“I was amazed at the compact size of the ESPRITE for the power and number of features – very impressive,” he declared, but above that it is the actual quality of the light coming out of the ESPRITE and how it looks on the performers which he finds “amazing”.

Continuing with new Robe technology, eight out of 24 x Tetra2 moving LED bars proved ideal for edging the top and bottom of the upstage 10 x 4 metre LED screen, with the other 16 placed along the edge of the stage in the footlights position, giving three distinctive lines of piercing Tetra2 beams and some great interactional effects.

“They are so versatile,” he says. Having these vibrant fabulous walls of lighting behind the performers brought plenty of impact, especially when bumped into the flower effect which looked super-cool on camera, together with slow flower-effect chases along the battens.

Next on the Robe extras list was 48 x Spikies which were rigged on five steel frames also on dollies and used to create columns of light 2.5 metres high by 1.5 metre wide in different locations onstage.

A stellar line up of guest artists included Cassper Nyovest, DJ Zinhle, Nomcebo, Master KG (of Jerusalema dance fame), Ami Faku and last year’s winner Luyolo Yiba ... and Josh particularly made great dramatic use of the Tetra2’s during the hugely popular Nyovest’s performance.

Josh also brought in three RoboSpot systems for the final.

Two BaseStations controlled two Robe BMFL WashBeams located at FOH and the third system was connected to four BMFL Blades on one of the back trusses, used for tight and neat rear spotting on the theatre stage. Josh loved being able to do this from a nice steep, precise angle with all beams looking identical, moving in complete harmony, and hitting the performers cleanly, avoiding unsightly spill onto the stage floor or other areas.

A healthy splattering of pyro was also added for extra finale glitter and sparkle.

Approximately 350 custom pixel blocks were scattered around the audience seating which twinkled and chased in the background adding atmosphere, cool camera bokeh and filling what would otherwise have been a dark empty space with presence and atmosphere.



The Idols Live Show house rig contained 48 Robe moving lights, including 6 x BMFL Blades which were used for additional back light; 16 LEDWash 800s on ladder trusses used as upstage blinders; 16 x Pointes also on ladders, plus 16 x ColorWash 2500s which created a rear 'blanket' effect. There were also some ColorWash 700s - still going strong after several years of service - which were positioned around the house band.

Josh worked with his associate Andre Siebrits who programmed and operated the grandMA full size console which was running with a light as backup and an MA OnPC for visualisation ... with a healthy 32 universes of DMX feeding into the system. A Green Hippo Boreal+ media server running via the console dealt with playback content for the LED screens.

"The trick was using all these extra moving lights judiciously and properly multifunctionally," he explained referring to lighting 12 songs over the two-hour broadcast.



This setup with Andre allowed Josh to focus on directing the lighting and creating a variety of iconic signature looks for each song as well as generally making the space look bigger and different from the rounds.

Weeks of shows, serious style, plenty of flair, interest and 180 million votes later ... the hugely talented Zama Khumalo was crowned winner of Idols SA 2020.

“It allowed all of us on the production team to end an exceptionally challenging year on a high,” concluded Josh, who like everyone in the industry, has been hit hard by the shutdown of live events.

Now everyone is looking forward to 2021, the implementation of an effective vaccination programme and things being able to start returning to some sort of ‘normal’.

Photos by Duncan Riley