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British lighting designer Graham McLusky on his recent visit to South Africa, along with DWR Distribution's Duncan Riley.

For the past seventeen years, British lighting designer Graham McLusky has made his way to South Africa to light the annual pantomime, which runs at Joburg Theatre over November and the December holidays and this season presents the amazing, hilarious Jack and the Beanstalk. It is receiving rave reviews from everyone!

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“My story started seventeen years ago when Janice Honeyman (director) and Bernard Jay (producer) were in consultation with Qdos, the UK pantomime producers,” Graham recalls. “They were working on an arrangement with Qdos to supply sets and costumes from the UK and wanted to include an established UK panto lighting designer. Qdos rang me and, as I had never been to Johannesburg before, it seemed like a fabulous idea.” Qdos have production facilities based in London, Scarborough, a town on England’s North Sea coast, and Beverley, a historic market town of the East Riding of Yorkshire, where they create and maintain spectacular stage sets and over 100,000 costumes for their enormous portfolio of Pantomimes.

Janice and Bernard wanted to build on the already well established and successful panto productions while adapting them to convey a distinctly South African flavour. “Every year, I come over and incorporate all my British panto lighting ideas and occasionally even suggest a few jokes and routines. Most do not appear in the show, because they don’t always work. The humour can be quite different sometimes and what works in the UK may not in South Africa!”

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Over the years, Janice and Bernard have worked closely to create productions that keep South Africans coming back for a more, a magical combination that creates an amazing feel-good factor. “I love the way Janice puts in just about every culture and snippets of local languages from this country,” says Graham. “And she does one incredible job! A while back we discussed the hysterical routine called, ‘The Twelve Days of Christmas, which is very popular in UK Pantos, right at the end of the show in place of the traditional sing along. This also allows plenty of time for the finale to be set up behind.’ We watched some videos on YouTube and Janice simply said: ‘leave it with me.’ Before you knew it, we had an all-South African Twelve Days of Christmas that its now a highlight of the show!

For the routine, a selection of obscure props are used in the song and end up being placed on the front of the stage during the routine. The actors pick them up and put them down again as they go through the song ...‘On the first day of Christmas, my true love sent to me, a fairy for the top of the tree.’ “It goes on with two pots and pans, six rugby boots, seven wooden spoons, smelly socks, knickers & bras, and so on. It is cleverly rehearsed “chaos”. By the time the song is finished, everyone is panting and gasping and then they do it all again at twice the speed! It’s very funny, and the children love it,” Graham muses.

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Graham usually stays in the country for two weeks, having already sent across his lighting plots and plans. Prior to his arrival this season came the sad passing of Simon James, who played an enormous role as Production Manager and associate producer at the Joburg Theatre and for who the panto was a personal highlight each year. “I came over on a Sunday and Bernard and Janice invited me to lunch where we chatted, mainly about Simon, and prepared ourselves for a ‘Simonless’ panto. It was most strange without him. The following day, we did a run-through of the panto in the theatre’s rehearsal room, where I made lots of notes. This initial run is the first time I get to see the production and is very important.

Of great advantage is the fact that the crew had an entire week to set up the rig before we moved into the theatre. “The team at Joburg Theatre know my way of working, and the rig layout is always similar to the previous year, as it needs to fit the layout of scenery, but with lots of new and current lighting toys this time,” Graham points out. Because pantomime is typically a lot of scenery compacted in to the available space, cloths, hard scenery and ornate Portals as well, there is a limit to how many lights you can squeeze in. There are many many lighting units in these pantos, each with a specific job to do. Joburg Theatre normally has a saturated permanent rig... until it’s panto time. Apparently, I’m the only lighting designer for whom they strip out most of the permanent rig. I appreciate all the amazing effort taken. You just can’t really light a panto successfully any other way.”

This Christmas, forty years ago, Graham lit his first panto. “I used to go out and do a lot of tours

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around the UK but pantomime is always a favourite! In those early days, there were no such thing as moving lights, and the few that eventually did exist were incredibly expensive, so producers didn't want to hire them," he smiles. "Apparently at the time, Vari-Lite had a strict privacy policy and used to have technicians on standby to repair any faults from inside a black "hospital" tent at the side of the stage to house their equipment, and nobody was allowed in!"

Fortunately, times have changed, and Graham was delighted to access the theatre's new lighting gear, which included twelve Claypaky Sharpy Plus fixtures, twenty Vari-Lite VL2600 Spots and four Robert Juliat Cyrano followspots, recently purchased from DWR Distribution.



"The Robert Juliat followspots are fantastic," says Graham. "The RJs are so bright that the guys were trying to reduce them down to a lower intensity. I suggested that we used them at full brightness and they worked extremely well".

He was also pleased with the Vari-Lite 2600s. "They're fabulous, with an LED source, which gives them plenty of edge. We used a lot of gobos for the show, mainly the standard ones, and the colours are excellent. I very much like the quality of the colour mixing."

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For the first time, Graham had the opportunity to use Claypaky's Sharpy Plus luminaires. "I've never used a Sharpy before, though other LDs have said I ought to try them. However, I usually do not have use for really piercing beams of light. When I discovered that the Sharpy Plus units have gobos and an effects wheel, I thought I'd incorporate them in the show. We also used them as special pick-ups on the stage as well as for throwing beam shapes and patterns over the audience."

Who would have thought that a phone call, seventeen years ago, would make Graham a part of an extended family in South Africa? "Over the years, the Joburg Theatre has been incredibly accommodating. Everybody has been marvellous, and I am welcomed back every time with open arms. I'm here so often that when I do come back, it seems like I've only been gone a day!"

Show photos courtesy Joburg Theatre