Happy thoughts at Joburg Theatre with L-Acoustics

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By procurement commission, the newly installed L-Acoustics professional audio system at The Mandela Stage at Joburg in Braamfontein arrived just in time for Janice Honeyman’s production of Peter Pan, which runs until 24 December 2023 and which has been described as one her best pantomimes to date. The enhanced audio quality has elevated the overall audience experience, making it a show that the technical team at The Joburg Theatre is exceptionally proud of.

The theatre’s former L-Acoustics sound system was installed by audio engineer Richard Smith in

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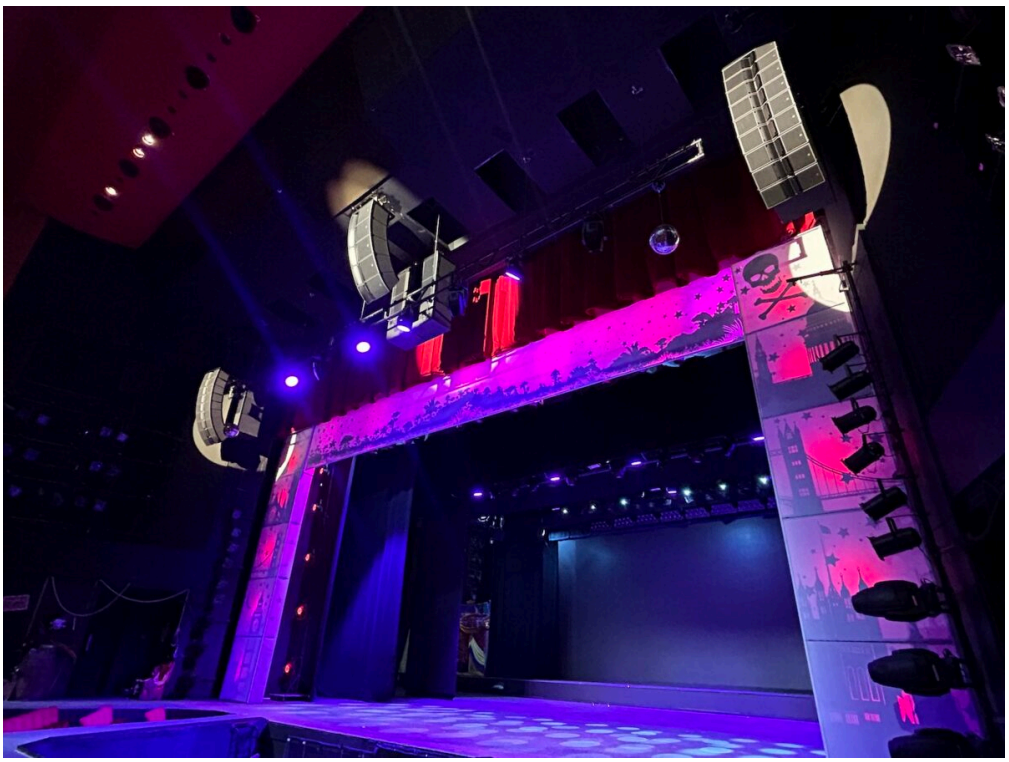
2002. In 2018, Richard became part of the DWR Distribution team when the company was officially appointed as the L-Acoustics Certified Provider Distributor for South Africa. When DWR recently secured the contract for Joburg Theatre’s new audio system, Richard was thrilled to once again take charge of designing the system, with the installation overseen by Andrew Rodgers (Andi).



“The previous system lasted 21 years, a testament to the reliability of the product,” remarks Richard Smith. “The new system sounds completely different and has never been this smooth. This time round, Akhona Bozo, Joburg Theatre’s Head of Audio, specified a left, centre and right line array system with flown subwoofers, fills and surround speakers. The arrays cover everything, allowing the audio engineer to place different instruments wherever desired and hear them clearly from anywhere in the

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auditorium.”



Akhona Bozo and Enos Ramoroko from the Joburg Theatre with Richard Smith (centre) from DWR Distribution.

Time posed the greatest challenge for the installation, but Richard and the DWR team, in collaboration with the theatre’s Head of Technical, Enos Ramoroko and of course Akhona, were determined not to let Tick-Tock the Crocodile get the better of them! On a typical installation, a single block of time would be allocated for the installation, but given the prestigious and busy nature of the theatre, which operates every week of the year, the team only were able to work on Mondays, except for the days when new shows moved in.

Richard strategically divided the installation into distinct tasks, such as sorting out the cabling and rewiring in the background with the assistance of The Install Crew, and a day dedicated to

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rigging custom brackets, manufactured and installed by DWR's Keith Pugin and the manufacturing team, needed to hang the PA. "The actual PA was installed during production week of the panto, usually a very busy time that wouldn't be viable," says Richard. "However, because we were well-prepared, we could work in front of the stage while the set team continued for two days. We kept the orchestra pit at stage level and did our thing. By the third day when the crew wanted to lower the orchestra pit, we were already finished with hanging the main PA and could begin testing."



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Richard Smith and colleague Jaco Beukes, who took on the role as system engineer, head rigger, and tuning specialist, collaborated with Tom Laveuf, Application Engineer at L-Acoustics to create a detailed report when originally submitting their audio proposal to the Joburg Theatre. This comprehensive document outlined the audio forecast and ensured that the end result precisely matched what was being communicated to the client. "I think that's the one thing that separates L-Acoustics from other suppliers because we provide written assurance that the client will receive

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what they asked for," said Richard.



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The system comprised of left and right main arrays consisting of 9 Kara IIi per side.

The left and right sub-arrays are made up of three SB18 IIi flown behind in a cardioid configuration. The centre array consists of four A15 Focus and one A15 Wide, while the centre subs are made up of six KS21i, flown in two columns of three also in cardioid configuration. The fills are four X8 and the front fills are made up of six 5XT. The surround speakers include four X8 downstairs and another four X8 upstairs. The system is powered by LA4X, LA8 and LA12X amplified controllers.

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Centre cluster

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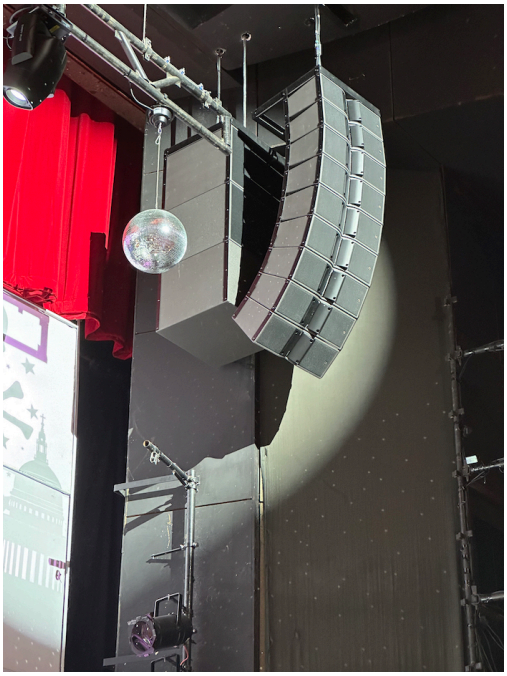
Stage left

While the system is a permanent installation, the small 5XT front fills can move physically depending on the orchestra pit configuration, with custom-made brackets allowing them to mount on the stage front regardless of audience configuration.

Running the audio is the theatre’s DiGiCo SD9, also originally supplied by DWR, and part of the audio upgrade included an additional AES digital output card to run the system digitally, with automatic analog redundancy. Richard emphasises, “There are a couple of settings in regard to the volume and timing that we don’t really want people to change, and we have worked with Akhona on almost locking certain aspects of the system to outside people unless it’s someone we know and trust. But we’ve given them enough versatility in the number of feeds from the desk to the system to ensure that any sound engineer can fulfil the requirements of a theatre production. Many of the shows have straight forward musical content, requiring no overly intricate adjustments. The next year will be a learning curve and we’ll be on standby for support. Ongoing training with the crew is essential for making informed decisions and enhancing their

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skills.”



Side view

Enos Ramoroko has been part of the Joburg Theatre since 1994, starting as a lighting technician. When it comes to panto season, Enos and his team work all year long to prepare and this year he even tried his hand at woodwork for the first time and is super proud of the set pieces he has built. ‘It feels good to see the young ones coming up and actually telling me how to do my job,’ he teases. “You are only as good as your team. It’s a good feeling to know that there are people who can continue with the work at the theatre.

While Enos vaguely remembers the installation of the previous L-Acoustics system, this time round, he played a key role in the leadership decision that made the new investment possible. He says he was truly impressed by the audio, even while Richard and Jaco were testing the

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system. “It sounds very good and I think we have the best pantomime in years, partly due to the sound.”



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Enter audio maestro Akhona, who much like Peter Pan, just doesn’t seem to age. After 17 vibrant years at Joburg Theatre, his youthful spirit and passion are even more pronounced, and with the intro of the new L-Acoustics system he personally designed… well he just couldn’t be happier.

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Akhona Bozo, Joburg Theatre’s Head of Audio

Once Jaco and Richard completed the installation, the first thing Akhona noticed was the incredible experience of standing in the mix position, feeling like he had reference monitors right in front of him as the sound played. “I’ve always said that when it comes to L-Acoustics it takes an effort to mess up the sound! But of course, with an ageing system, it began to show signs of performance decline,” Akhona reflects. “Because working at the Joburg Theatre has been my first and only job, I’ve only ever known L-Acoustics sound. While I’ve always been a fan of the brand, the new system just blew me away. Richard gave us a system that delivers optimal coverage, sounds great, and takes minimal effort to actually mix a show.”

This year’s pantomime was once again written and directed by Janice Honeyman, with musical direction by Dale-Ray Scheepers, choreography by Khaya Ndlovu, lighting design by Johan Ferreira and production designer Andrew Timm and the proof of the audio success is in the

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pudding!

“My wife usually critiques or compliments me and her opinion matters to me,” says Akhona. “She came to see Peter Pan and felt it was the best pantomime she had seen in years and we’ve been married for 11 years! Despite sitting at the back of the theatre, she could hear the coverage perfectly. Even my kids, who have sensitive ears, didn’t need to block them. L-Acoustics provides a nice balance without having to push the system. For me coverage was everything and Richard succeeded in addressing that.”



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Akhona adds, “The DWR team were amazing. They always consult, are very informative, have a story to tell behind each product and we could count on the installation team. This has been a wonderful experience for me.”

To conclude, when the Peter Pan panto kicked off at Joburg Theatre in November 2023, Akhona found himself at FOH when a senior lady suddenly opened the curtain. Typically, that move signalled one thing, “The sound is too loud!” However, to everyone’s surprise, she introduced

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herself as a former employee of the State Theatre. And instead of complaints, she showered the technical team with compliments, declaring that the panto sounded beautiful. For the tech crew, those words were like a sprinkle of…. fairy dust.



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Acknowledgements:

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