

The Hexagon Theatre

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Marcus Henning with DWR's Nick Barnes & the old Strand console

It's rare to come across a theatre that's cared for in every way from the entrance to the vacuumed walkways and even the management offices and FOH. It's a place where billboard posters of previous shows are framed and neatly hung up on walls and you'll be surprised to know that some of the Hexagon Theatre's original consoles, including a Strand MMS Control Desk and a Strand Gemini, are still in pristine condition.

The Hexagon, which forms part of the University of KZN, is a jewel within Pietermaritzburg. While the town formerly wore the title of being one of the best kept Victorian cities in the world, the theatre's management have taken a firm stand in protecting and maintaining the building and ensuring a constant surge of productions are hosted. While other theatres in the vicinity have sadly closed their doors, including the Rowe and Cygnet Theatres, the Hexagon has remained an active community member. After a long, slow decline the Winston Churchill Theatre received some TLC and new equipment from DWR Distribution and will hopefully once again be providing a venue to artists of all kinds.



The right person to take you on a theatre tour is Marcus Henning, Technician Head who was born and raised in 'Maritzurg. In fact, he was 12 years old the first time he stood on stage for a show called "Other side of the wardrobe", the Narnia story. "I still do a bit of acting every now and then," he'll tell you, "But one day I discovered I could do the technical side. The first desk I worked on was the Strand Mini 2 control. I still have it here at the Hexagon, and it still works. In fact, the Strand Mini 2 dimmers still work too and I used them just last year."



Retired Dan Riley remembers working as a technician to ensure the opening of the then brand new Hexagon in 1977. In those years he was employed at Rank Strand, working with Malcolm McClain, and he was involved in installing the first dimmers and control desk at the theatre.

“That was when Dr Denis Schaffer was a lecturer in the Drama Department,” recalls Dan Riley. “It was his initiative that set the whole thing going. The Hexagon was designed to be theatre in the round. It’s almost circular and they could put proscenium and seats anywhere. It had the whole integral switch system with plug in roof. It was designed for experimental theatre. Denis Schaffer was a visionary in the theatre industry. He drove the idea of the Hexagon. He and his wife were lovely. “



Riley remembers the Hexagon being wonderful and the university simply immaculate. “There is a lot of history that has gone down,” he said. “The first board they put in was the Rank Strand MMS. The dimmers were Strand STMs. I think it was a 120 way, it had a large patch panel. I can still picture it. “



Thanks to the team, headed by Peter Mitchell (Director), Sandra Styles (Theatre Manager) and of course Marcus Henning, great care is being taken to keep this candle burning. Up-coming shows for February include Dancing in the Desert, Dirt, Woza Albert!, and the Annual Hexagon Minifest. For more information, please see: <https://hexagon.ukzn.ac.za/Home.aspx>.

