

Hippotizer Nevis+ tells a South African story at Expo 2020
Dubai

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Hippotizer Nevis+ on Charlotte Maxeke, Mother of Black Freedom

Team South Africa participated alongside 190 countries at Expo 2020 Dubai, which opened its doors on 1 October 2021, under the theme Identity: South African Culture. Wilhelm Disbergen, a production designer for the past two decades who specialises in the set, lighting, and AV design for theatre productions, put his brand new Hippotizer Nevis+ to work for the musical theatre production *Charlotte Maxeke, Mother of Black Freedom* held on 16 October and presented by The Department of Sport, Arts and Culture and The South African State Theatre during the exhibition.

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The aim of Dubai Exp 2020 is to create a platform where citizens from around the world can share ideas, come up with solutions, build bridges between nations and attract interest and investors. One of the stories South Africa told during this time was that of mama Charlotte Maxeke, a religious leader, political activist and the first black woman to graduate with a university degree in South Africa with a B.sc from Wilberforce University Ohio in 1903. Her legacy continues, and the former Johannesburg General Hospital is now known as the Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital.



Wilhelm Disbergen (photo by Suzy Bernstein)

Charlotte Maxeke, Mother of Black Freedom, was written by Aubrey Sekhabi and featured big names, Thandiswa Mazwa and Mafikizolo. Wilhelm Disbergen of Yellow Bunny Productions NPC, who created all the visual content and was responsible for the lighting and set design, took ownership of a Nevis+, supplied by DWR Distribution, only days before flying to Dubai. Disbergen already owns two Hippotizer Rackoons and a Boreal and was the first in the country to purchase the Nevis+, a compact (1/2 19" IU) media server that offers an extensive toolset to allow the creation, visualization and playback of video content in real-time.

"Wilhelm is well known for his remarkable imagination and how he creatively uses his Hippotizer servers," said Dylan Jones of DWR. "We've spent a great deal of time over the years discussing

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ways to implement technology to create the beautiful stages he is known for. While I knew the Nevis+ would not disappoint, with all the challenges Wilhelm faced on this production, it became more of a life saver in his capable hands instead of just a tool.”

“The initial idea was to set up the production in The Opera House at the State Theatre in Pretoria exactly as we would in Dubai, including cameras, lights and LED screens, so that when we landed it would just be a matter of setting up and programming the lights,” Disbergen describes. Rehearsals were mind-blowing and saw the narrator and main actress, Nondumiso Tembe, a South African artist based in Los Angeles, attending sessions via Zoom and singing alongside the band based in the venue. The intention was that she would ultimately perform live in Dubai.

Sadly, Nondumiso’s visa didn’t arrive on time. “The entire show is a tribute to Charlotte Maxeke and has pages and pages of monologue that tells a story,” said Disbergen. “It’s interspersed by song and dance, and suddenly we had an empty stage in between performances.”

With only two or three days to spare, Nondumiso approached a local studio where all her performances were recorded using a green screen. Disbergen, anxious about using the new Nevis+, was putting it through an arduous marathon, throwing things at it like 12 layers of video running at the same time, just to see how it would cope. “I added Nondumiso’s performances as another layer and cued it, block by block, to make it part of the overall show. It was super stressful as nobody else could do it, and I sat editing, not knowing if the Nevis+ would handle it. But it was amazing! The Nevis+ didn’t freeze, stutter, or once give any problems. We added clips where Nondumiso sings acapella alongside live artists on stage, and she was now larger than life, projected onto the LED screen. It was exceptional.”

His next hurdle was getting to Dubai! After arriving at the airport packed and ready to go three days in a row (thanks to complications with his booking and not mentioning the cost for numerous Covid-19 tests needed for each potential flight) Disbergen was about to admit defeat when he was finally allocated a seat, one upgraded to first class. The show could go on! With a few hours

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to spare on arrival in Dubai, he soaked up the exquisite architecture and design at Expo 2020, where numerous countries erected buildings to represent the smart city of the future.



Set up for Charlotte Maxeke, Mother of Black Freedom in the Hilton's ballroom

Charlotte Maxeke, Mother of Black Freedom formed part of the opening ceremony for the South African pavilion and was hosted in the Hilton's ballroom. An exceptionally tight schedule saw load in commencing at 3 am on Saturday, the venue being used just hours before for a wedding, and doors ready to open by 6 pm to an audience of ambassadors and delegates from across the globe. With the Nevis+ being his only piece of equipment from home, Disbergen was relieved to have the use of a grandMA2 full size, supplied by a local rental company. The set comprised of a stage, screen and LED lighting for ambience.

"With the Hippotizer Nevis+, I had confidence despite all the challenges we faced," he concludes. "I've used Green Hippo since the brand first came to South Africa, but to have something so small and compact that it fits into my laptop bag, yet powerful enough to run a huge screen and a 30k projector, is amazing."

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