Lyric Theatre opens at Gold Reef City

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Hairspray cast courtesy John Hogg

When other boys his age were catching frogs or riding their chopper bicycles on a bright sunny day, the then ten year old Denis Hutchinson, known as “Hutch” and arguably one of South Africa’s finest LDs, was lighting his first show.

He admits that it was lit “very, very badly”, but it was most likely the stepping stone that set the rest of his career into motion. By the time he was sixteen years old, Hutch was actively involved with school and

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amateur plays and extended his interest to do voluntarily work on set ups and strikes at venues such as His Majesty's and the Alexander Theatre. "It was a way to learn and it paid off," said Hutch. By the time he left school, there was little need for him to introduce himself, and he has found himself constantly employed from 1977.

It therefore came as no surprise that after working many years with professionals such as Richard Loring (synonymous for the Sound Stage and productions including African Footprint and Girl Talk), and his right hand manager, Debbie Batzofin, that Hutch was nominated as the consultant for the new Lyric Theatre by Loring. This theatre opened its doors at the Gold Reef City Casino in Johannesburg, with the hugely acclaimed production *Hairspray* for which Hutch also wore his second cap, that of the Lighting Designer for the show.

"The intention of being both consultant and LD was two-fold," said Hutch and playfully adds, "Firstly, I had to see to the completion of the theatre and be on hand for trouble-shooting. The second motive was purely selfish; I chose the new toys for the theatre and I wanted to be the first to play with them."

Hutch had a strict brief to fulfil as the consultant. Quite deliberately he had to ignore what gear would work best for himself as LD or for the *Hairspray* production, and instead select options that would be versatile and right for the theatre.

("Hutch", pic courtesy Debra Batzofin)

The Lyric Theatre as it stands contains equipment that is compatible to most shows, and should run any production without compromise. It contains 68 moving heads alone, which is more than any other theatre in the country. Predominantly Robe, other high profile equipment includes ETC Source 4s, Clay Paky, ADB Warp, Zero 88, Robert Juliat, Chroma Q Scrollers and Martin Smoke and Haze machines, with all gear controlled via a grandMA console.

The proverbial saying, "Many hands make light work," couldn't be more true and relevant to the Lyric Theatre. With Hutch being very particular about what equipment he wanted, he finally selected DWR Distribution, Prosound, T & A Lighting, Electrosonic and Iyeza to provide and install his kit of choice. Everyone came to the party giving Hutch peace of mind that equipment was of a world class standard. He was assured of back-up service and support when necessary, and prices were also negotiated which ultimately allowed for a few extras.

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Mark Malherbe from Prosound provided the sound aspect and acknowledges that the venue will never sound right unless there is a jack hammer going off somewhere in the background! Needless to say, it wasn't an easy installation working on a building site, lots of dust and there being constant pressure to meet deadlines.

Richard Loring bought the direction and choreography for *Hairspray* and not the design. "With hindsight, perhaps we should have bought the entire package," said Hutch, "as its not easy doing a new design around the requirements of an established piece without copying the original. However, when you consider that we're looking at a six month run here compared to more than five years on Broadway, scale of numbers limits what you can afford to do and it was up to American set and costume designers Michael Bottari and Ronald Case and myself to try and make it work in a way that is affordable here." At the time of writing, the show had not yet been exposed to a real paying audience, the official opening being on the 28th October, but the feedback, even from critics, has been phenomenal.

Hairspray is set in 1962, and while as Hutch says it is a very busy little show, he couldn't get too fancy with the lighting. "In 1962 there were no moving lights other than follow spots and although certain things like colour wheels were technically possible, it was not till 1978 that Tharon Musser used sixty-four of them on *Ballroom* and dazzled everyone. I do cheat a little, but it would look odd if I did too many modern effects in what is actually a period piece."

(Courtesy John Hogg)

Lighting

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“Unlike the other lamps in the rig which have their background in rock and roll, the ADB Warp/Ms are designed specifically for Opera. They are very quiet, but that is achieved by limiting the speed of the functions. Normally they wouldn’t compete against the faster units – which are too noisy for Opera – but in a musical situation, one is suddenly aware of the speed difference. I hope ADB may offer a menu option which allows faster changes when noise is not a priority in future software versions. That said, I have found them extremely useful units and I can’t wait to try them out in a drama or opera where speed is not the issue,” he said. The units are bulky, largely due to all the mechanics being in the fork and not in the light. Looking at the unit, they have a “different” design to say the least, but they do offer features no other units have with silence and accuracy being a huge plus.

While Hutch believes the grandMA desk from MA Lighting was the best choice for the venue, actually using the desk was a major learning curve. “No amount of training is enough; the first show is the real learning period and the programming was a lot slower than it might have been had I opted for something more familiar like a Strand Palette, but it was all about discovery and getting used to the desk,” explained Hutch. “The desk has been stable and there has been no issue of losing anything, which is always a big plus!” The Strand Palette was a strong contender but at the time the software was not ready and is still evolving.

Having used the Robe Wash lights in the past, Hutch was very comfortable with them. “The Spots don’t work as hard as the Washes on this show, and they don’t always cut through as much as I might have liked,” commented Denis, “but on another show, the features of the Spots will no doubt come to the fore, so it really swings and round-abouts.”

DWR Distribution supplied the automated lighting and control for the Lyric Theatre, which included the purchase of eight Clay Paky Alpha 1 200 Profile fixtures from T & A Lighting’s Ian Blair. The Alpha Profile fixtures were chosen because of their framing system. T & A Lighting also provided equipment for the dimming side. Here the Zero 88 Chilli dimmers (264 channels) were used. There were ten racks of 24 channels at 10 Amps per channel and four racks of six channels at 25 Amps per channel. Over 210 Generic profiles comprising Source 4 fixtures were selected. “They are regarded as the industry standard and were provided by T & A Lighting,” commented Ian. There were a number of accessories supplied for these fixtures including Top Hats, Gobo Holders and Irises.

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(Courtesy Debra Batzofin)

In addition to the lighting, T & A Lighting supplied a number of Prolyte Stage Dex with variable leg heights. With a total run of cable of around 1.5km, the installation process was rather difficult due to various delays caused by unforeseen circumstances. The dimmers were positioned on the OP Gantry, and all fixed DMX power and certain of the scroller cable was supplied and installed by T & A Lighting.

To compliment lighting, smoke machines are a vital and world-wide the Jem Range of machines are rated as one of the best. Bruce Swartz from Electrosonic commented, “Jem have been around for about twenty years and for the last decade they have been part of the Martin Professional Group. Jem also has a huge market share partly due to being part of the Total Solutions Supplier (Martin Professional). They produce a full range of smoke products and dedicated fog fluids from small sized “party” machines to the largest 160kg “concert” machines.” Electrosonic also supplied the Colour Scrollers and 4 Robert Juliat Topaz Followspots. He adds, “Robert Juliat is a world leader in performance followspots. These were Denis’ first choice and he was very glad to get them in the budget.” Bruce took pleasure in being part of the project. “Denis is always good to work for. He knows what he wants and does not leave anything to chance.”

Aubrey Ndaba and his team from Iyeza spent at least a month making cables. With around 1km of socapex, 1km of scroller cables and 1km of DMX, this did not even include socapex to janus connectors and socapex to plugtops. Aubrey loved the show, “It really brought back memories of living in the 60’s,” he commented.

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(Courtesy Adam Houghton)

Sound

The installed sound system in the venue is based on a left, centre and right line array configuration, said Mark Malherbe. The units are self powered Meyer Sound, M'Elodie loudspeakers. The current show configuration is for 7 units left, 6 units centre and 7 right, which can easily be reconfigured to suite. The system is of international standards and suitable for any productions anticipated in the venue albeit from classical to hard rock. Sub bass units are installed left and right of the proscenium.Front fill loudspeakers are installed on the leading edge of the stage but can be moved to suite production requirements. Two in fill loudspeakers are used for the current production but can be maintained or removed for future shows as required.

All sound system processing is via a Media Matrix DSP unit, which can be reconfigured to suite specific show requirements (8 in 16 out).

There is an installed Yamaha DM 2 000 digital mixing console configured for a total of 96 inputs. 32 Inputs are permanently wired via AES/EBU to the onstage radio microphone rack. There are a total of 32 lavaliere systems, 6 of which can be interchanged for handhelds if required. In addition 32 lines are available in an AES/EBU format in the orchestra pit.

There are a total of 160 analogue lines from stage to FOH over and above the digital links.

10 Multi purpose loudspeakers are provided for stage monitoring applications. A complement of microphones and source equipment is also available.

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There is a stage managers console with a three ring fully duplex communication system and 12 portable belt pack/headset combinations are provided.

CCTV camera systems are provided for the run of show relay and conductor to cast. A comprehensive video tie line system is installed in the venue.

Lighting and sound aside, for Hutch the love of words in scripts have kept him going and staying in the industry through the years. “There is nothing like a well written play,” said Hutch and concludes, “Theatre is all about ideas, not pictures and the most interesting things happen off stage… in the audience’s imagination.”

Equipment List

Lighting:

8	x	1.2kW Moving head framing spots – Alpha 1 200 Spot
6	x	Robe ColorWash 750 Tungsten
24	x	Robe ColorSpot 700 EAT Complete
24	x	Robe ColorWash 700 EAT Complete
6	x	ADB Warp Zoom Profiles
1	x	grandMA Full
1	x	grandMA 4 Port NSP

Zero 88 Chilli dimmers – 264 channels

24	x	Source Four 10˚ Profile
60	x	Source Four 19˚ Profile
48	x	Source Four 26˚ Profile

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48	x	Source Four 36˚ Profile
24	x	Source Four Par fixtures
12	x	Source Four Multi Battons – 12 cell

Accessories comprising Top Hats, Gobo Holders and Irises for the above

4	x	Robert Juliat Topase 1200w Followpots
6	x	Martin DMX Optosplitters
4	x	Jem ZR 33 Hi Mass Smoke Machines
2	x	Jem 24.7 Haze Machines
1	x	Jem Glaciator Low Fog Machine
32	x	Chroma Q Plus Scrollers
36	x	Chroma Q Broadway Scrollers
12	x	Chroma Q Power Suppliers
6	x	Strand 6 Way Wall Racks for House Light and Foyer Lighting

Sound:

20	x	Meyer Sound, Meolodie, Self Powered Speaker System
6	x	Meyer Sound, Dual 15” Sub Bass Drivers, Self Powered Speaker System
8	x	Electro-Voice Two Way 150 Watt Front Fill Loudspeaker Systems
2	x	Crest Dual Channel Power Amplifiers – Front Fill
3	x	Rigging Bracket for Melodie C/W Chain Block

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12	x	Electro-Voice Two Way 12” Monitor Loudspeaker Systems
6	x	Crest Dual Channel Power Amplifiers – Monitors
2	x	C/W 12 Mixers
1	x	Yamaha Digital Theatre Mixing Desk
1	x	Media Matrix, Neon, Digital Signal Processor 8 in 16 out
2	x	Denon Professional Compact Disc Players
2	x	Prosound PC C/W 2 Meg Ram and 1 Cuebase Package
1	x	Generic 8 Port Hub
32	x	DPA Headworn Microphones
40	x	DPA Lapel Microphones
32	x	Sennheiser 500 Series C/W Body Pack Transmitter
6	x	Sennheiser 500 Series C/W Handheld Transmitter
4	x	Electro-Voice Dynamic Super Cardioid Lead Vocal Microphones
8	x	Electro-Voice Dynamic Cardioid Instrument Microphones
1	x	Drum Microphone Set C/W Clips
20	x	K&M Microphone Stands
12	x	KT DI Boxes

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