Meeting Peter Abrahamse of Gearhouse

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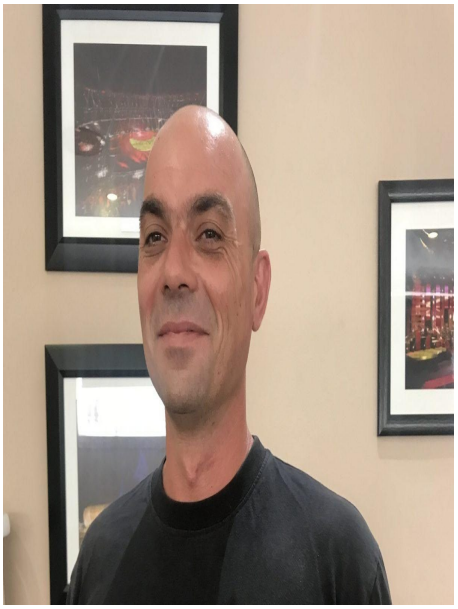

TPMEA sits down with Gearhouse South Africa's Peter Abrahamse to review his professional journey as one of the major players in the region's burgeoning live events sector... Many thanks to Editor, Peter Iantorno, for allowing DWR to run the story.

As a Senior Lighting Crew Boss at Gearhouse South Africa, Peter Abrahamse has witnessed first-hand the evolution of live events in the region, playing a key role as a driving force in the expansion of South Africa's live touring calendar during his 17 years at the company. A hardened touring veteran, Abrahamse has become Gearhouse's go-to guy when it comes to putting together the nuts, bolts and faces

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behind South Africa's live events.

"There's no reward greater than working really hard to prepare for a stadium concert and then watching 80,000 people enjoying the show, knowing that you have played a part in it," he shared.

"When I was in school, we did not have theatre as a subject, and I never knew an industry like this existed. I actually studied to be a draftsman and finished my qualifications in 1999, but there just wasn't any work."

His drafting training course took place when a pencil, paper and a drawing board were standard, but by the time students entered the workplace, companies were converting to computers. To keep ahead of his game, Abrahamse completed a CAD course which, unbeknownst to him, stood him in good stead for the career he was about to discover.

"I was doing a few odd jobs, but I wasn't happy," he recalled. "My girlfriend at the time – the daughter of industry legend Michael Lehr, who was then based at Gearhouse – got me an interview at Gearhouse's Cape Town branch."

The interview was with Dale Strydom, Head of Lighting, but he actually had sufficient lighting crew at the time. "Just as I was about to leave, I was approached by Keith May, the 'power guy' at Gearhouse." May invited Abrahamse to work a trial shift in his workshop. Coincidently, Abrahamse's father was an electrician and regularly shared his knowledge with his two sons – the trio even once rewired their family home – and thanks to this knowledge, May offered him a job.

After working at Gearhouse for three months, Abrahamse was moved to the lighting department and appointed as a 'rack man', responsible for plugging up the rig and making sure everything worked.

Fast-forward eight years, in October 2011, Stuart Andrews took over the lighting department at Gearhouse Johannesburg. "Many of the senior crew had moved on, and Stuart was looking for new guys," said Abrahamse. "I was brought up from Cape Town and offered an opportunity to work in the lighting department in Johannesburg on a trial basis. Stuart was absolutely amazing to work with and, by February 2012, he gave me a permanent contract. A year later, Stuart was sending me on jobs, making sure our team delivered. I realised that the skills I learnt in Cape Town as a rack man prepared me well to be a crew boss."

Working on large-scale shows from 2012 to 2016, Abrahamse's life on the road came to a sudden

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halt while on tour with UB40 in South Africa. “I somehow managed to knock the ceramic soap holder off the wall in the shower with my elbow, and the sharp piece of ceramic landed on my big toe and severed the tendon.”

By this time, Stuart Andrews had taken on the role of Operations Manager, and Adrian Skinner had taken over the lighting department. Abrahamse said: “I was hobbling around on crutches when Adrian asked if I would help him as Workshop Manager.”

Having accepted the post, Abrahamse still went out on select gigs, particularly when it came to high-profile clients or big deliveries. That said, he missed being out on the road permanently and, at the end of 2019, asked to be reinstated as a crew boss. “Gearhouse understood my passion and supported me wholeheartedly.”

There are always challenges on any event and, according to Abrahamse, extensive preparation and communication are key to ensure that shows run smoothly. While most factors on-site can be controlled by a competent and committed crew – the weather is not one of them, especially as so many events in Johannesburg are hosted outdoors.

“Thankfully, a couple of years ago, we invested in SelbyGuard rain roofs and air domes purchased from DWR Distribution, and this has made life a lot easier. Over New Years’ Eve, we had three big events, and all needed the rain protection covers. It cuts out the need to have crew climbing up wet scaffolding to put bags over lighting fixtures and has really made a positive difference.”

With so many fantastic shows behind him, Abrahamse looked back fondly on some of his personal highlights. “Top of my list is Neil Diamond,” he reminisced. “We toured the country, visiting four cities. We couldn’t organize a flight between Durban and Port Elizabeth, so we ended up travelling on a charter plane with Neil Diamond and his crew. They were wonderful people – an accomplished crew who could set up the rig in no time. We had an absolutely brilliant time with them.”

A close second on his list was his time spent on a Bruce Springsteen concert at the FNB Stadium, Johannesburg. “There was a long thrust, which came off the main stage. It started raining about two hours into the concert, at which point Bruce Springsteen took an acoustic guitar, walked out into the rain and performed for another hour and a half. It was a goosebump-inducing experience.”

He also noted the 2018 Global Citizen Festival as a highlight both for him and the region. “As

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tough and gruelling as it was, it was definitely a highlight for me," he continued. "We had the Global Citizen rig in at the FNB Stadium. We then had one night to take it out and put the entire Guns N' Roses rig in, and then after a night, took that out and put Global's rig back in. I have never done anything to that scale before."

In an era where people frequently switch jobs, Abrahamse has been with Gearhouse for 17 years. "I really do love the company," he explained. "I've grown here; I have never felt the need to move on. With the learnership programme Gearhouse offers students, I get to spend a lot of time with the youngsters."

Now approaching 40, Abrahamse acknowledged that there may be a time when he can't continue to take on the physicality of live touring, so he sees mentoring the next generation as crucial. "When I see them prepping something in the workshop, I'll point out if there's a chance that it's not going to work for them on site. Many are very grateful because instead of having to bump their heads, they get to learn the easy way," he commented. "If I can train the students, I will empower them."

Photos: Gearhouse South Africa

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