

Panto Time for Robe

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Lighting designer Andy Webb didn't have any hesitation about which additional production lighting he wanted on the rig for two high-profile UK 2023-24 pantomime seasons ... and that was Robe!

Panto is a quintessentially British performance genre that combines super-quick wit, slapstick comedy, double entendres, magic, fantasy and usually a bit of politics tossed together with the musical hits of the year in a trippy mash as action-packed as it is often absurd ... but usually the narrative ends happily!

"We like happy endings," commented Andy, which is why he specified Robe for these two key shows for producers UK Productions (UKP), *Snow White & The Seven Dwarves* at Aylesbury Waterside Theatre in Buckinghamshire directed by Chris Wilkins-Nelson, and *Cinderella* directed by Benji Sperring, staged at the Malvern Festival Theatre in Wiltshire, both produced by Martin Dodds.



The 1200-capacity Waterside Theatre is the larger venue in terms of both stage and audience sizes, and here Andy utilised 60 x Robe luminaires – a dynamic mix of T1 Profiles, Spiiders, MegaPointes, BMFL WashBeams, LEDBeam 150s, Cyc FX8s and ParFect 100s, together with elements of the in-house generic rig. He was delighted to be using T1s here this year.

The 850-seat Festival Theatre – now known as Malvern Theatres – is a cozier space and has been a provincial arts centre since 1885, and here Andy specified 45 x Robe fixtures which were a combination of MegaPointes, ParFect 100s and 150s, DL4S Spots, LEDWash 300s, plus some of the regular house conventionals.

Andy programmed the shows using Avolites Tiger Touch II consoles, each featuring approximately 300 cues. The additional production lighting equipment, including all the Robe products, was

supplied by rental specialist, CEG. Shaun Ellis was Andy's LX1 on both productions, and he also drew up all the follow spot plots.

As always, time was the biggest challenge in lighting both shows to the standard of excellence which Andy always shoots for.

The lighting get ins were on Sundays for show openings on the following Thursday. Andy received some set reference photos during construction and while the assorted drop cloths were being printed and painted, leaving three frantic days onstage to make it all happen.

At cast rehearsals during the day, he concentrated on real-time key and face lighting also filming the action, then worked overnight adding all the layers, details and complexities.

Andy cites the many advantages of having Robe fixtures on the job.



"Due to the number of scenes and the hectic pace of the shows and of panto in general, the workflow is always fast and furious," he explains, so having familiar fixtures is a must. This allows him to go into a show he's essentially not seen and emerge three days and countless button presses later, with a slick, colourful mix of all the atmospheric elements needed to help the crazy-foam pies fly!

"I can't get more time, but having the right tools enables me to work quickly, more efficiently and achieve more in a short timeframe!"

Andy thinks the excellent Robe gobo selection is always a "lifesaver" in these circumstances, especially when creating aerial effects and texturing, and particularly in the MegaPointes. "The emphasis on having excellent gobo sets in T1s and MegaPointes means that we usually don't need any custom Gobos," he said.

In Malvern, Andy used the MegaPointes as his general spots as no T1s were available for that show due to high demand. "MegaPointes worked very well in this role," he confirms, adding that he programmed the fixtures like they were T1s, including plenty of shutter work.



He was delighted to have T1s back at Aylesbury after a gap last year, due to their high demand

and being unavailable! Theatre designers generally prefer the additional output of the T1's multi-chip LEDs and the expanded range of colours. "I'll spec T1s every time for panto," he notes, "they produce beautiful natural skin tones and have a rich palette of colours."

Spiiders are another favourite.

"They are great general wash workhorses," said Andy who missed them at Malvern. He mentions that having the Flower effect 'up the sleeve', is handy, especially for the magical parts of the panto as fairies grant wishes that come true and baddies cast their spells. These are moments where Andy can use the central LED as the flower surrounded by intricately twinkling pixel-mapped rings of LEDs, contrasting well with T1 key lighting. The Spiider is also good for producing whites.

The overhead fixtures for both shows were spread out over 6 x LX bars with a spot-wash-spot-wash configuration to achieve maximum coverage, and a fan of MegaPointes for specials and pick-ups.



In both venues, Spiiders (Aylesbury) or ParFacts (Malvern) were rigged on the apron truss or in the side positions, utilised as front kickers and side fill. The LED chips in the Spiiders, LEDBeams and ParFacts are identical which assists with continuity and programming.

Andy loves many things about lighting panto including the 'no rules' relating how scenes and characters should or should not be lit.



Both theatres had new LED pros arches installed this year as part of the lighting / scenic setup, which allowed Andy to get even more interactive with audiences and draw them into the stories with lighting effects.

Andy and Shaun stayed with each of the shows for the first three days of their runs, with Aylesbury clocking up an impressive 57 shows over four weeks, entertaining around 50,000 people, and Malvern delivering 38 performances to approximately 30,000 people across 3 weeks, reinforcing the enduring popularity of panto for everyone!



Photos:

Aylesbury "Snow White" by Barry Rivett

Malvern "Cinderella" by Lisa Roberts