

Panto's leap into the future at Joburg Theatre

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The Joburg Theatre has turned pantomimes on its head with large LED screens replacing the use of traditional sets, usually shipped from England to South Africa, for Janice Honeyman's latest heartwarming production, *Cinderella*, which runs from 5 November to 24 December 2021. With raving reviews from critics and traditionalists alike, newly purchased Absen Polaris PL2.9 lite LED screens supplied by DWR Distribution, with content running off 2 Green Hippo Hippotizer Boreal+ servers, has the audience wondering what's real and what isn't in this fantasy world magnified by the show's production designer, Andrew Timm.

Pioneer behind the bold transformation, meet Prince Charming, aka Bernard Jay, who is the executive producer of Janice Honeyman's pantomimes, former CEO of The Joburg Theatre and whose love for the arts was born in England when first appointed as a theatre manager at the age of 18. "With *Cinderella* this year, I think it was the right people coming together at the right time," said Bernard who was concerned about the rising cost to run the annual production. "In June 2020, we started talking about the possibility of using new technology, but I was putting ridiculous pressure on Andrew Timm to come up with content for the production, which was ultimately postponed due to the pandemic."



Janice Honeyman had been putting on pantomimes for some time already when Bernard stepped in as CEO of the Joburg Theatre back in 2000. "Janice worked with Anthony Farmer as her designer and he built the spectacular sets locally, usually a kind of 'once off', because you wouldn't redo the same pantomime until at least eight years later. These huge sets were being kept in storage and nobody ever rented the sets as nobody did pantomimes of that size. I wanted to get rid of the expensive storage, especially as the sets were specific to what Janice did each year and could not really be used over again. Tony, very sadly, passed away quite quickly after that and when we could not identify a designer to create the kind of pantomimes Janice and I wanted, I felt the only alternative was to hire from Qdos in England."

Qdos is renowned for offering an enormous portfolio of pantomime sets and costumes, and Joburg Theatre's then production manager Simon James would travel back and forth, pack up the set for the longest sea trip to England, arriving in the UK to personally ensure the items were received in good repair, then helping to pack the next set that would return to South Africa. The process was becoming increasingly expensive, especially with the exchange rate, and addressing his concerns with Xoliswa Nduneni-Ngema, the Theatre's current CEO, he was given the go-ahead to find an

alternative solution.

Joburg Theatre had already purchased 240 Absen PL2.9 Lite LED panels from DWR Distribution in 2019, intending to revolutionise the use of set pieces and scenery. To create a set that would give production designer Andrew Timm the necessary tools to pull rabbits out of hats, a further 325 panels were purchased from DWR including a NovaPro UHD Junior, an LED screen scaler / processor, on a fibre backbone with CVT4K-S fibre converters to run the screen alongside theatres 2 existing Green Hippo Boreal media servers, all controlled on a grandMA2 light. DWR's Bruce Riley, Dylan Jones and Tyler Pugin, think of them as the not-so-ugly sisters, were pleased to offer back up and support to the theatre's technical manager, Enos Ramoroko.



Completely used to turning pumpkins into carriages, but usually, for corporate events, Andrew Timm could hardly believe his appointment as production designer for the upcoming show. Making waves with his ingenious designs for corporate events, Andrew would turn seminars into theatrical pieces, scripts and all, with flying artists and just a heart to create; a testimony being his appointment to supply Rand Merchant Bank's annual Conference for the past 15 years. "I first met Andrew in 2013 when he was putting on a gospel show titled *Daughters of the King* at Joburg Theatre," Bernard explains. "But Andrew also worked in the corporate arena with Dale-Ray Scheepers, the pantomime's musical director. Dale talked very highly about Andrew over the years, and when I wanted someone to design something very different for the pantomime, my memory was jogged and I made the call."

Growing up in Rhodesia before it became Zimbabwe, Andrew remembers sitting in front of the television and watching the test pattern before tv started. All he ever wanted was to work at the

SABC, but despite having studied journalism and drama at Rhodes University, his application to join the South Africa broadcast station was rejected. After serving in the South African army, he joined the corporate world, and in retrospect, he was pleased as it provided the means to ensure his children had a great education. "But I always felt as if I was on a detour," said Andrew. "I started doing things in corporate events that no one else was doing, brought theatre into videos and conferences, and would write scripts including loads of visual tricks and effects, something not many others were doing at the time."

Inspiration came from his favourite stage in the whole world... Eurovision! He'd see tricks and incorporate them into shows like levitating performers, using innovative AV tricks to have them interacting with video clones or their own shadows, and using screens to create emotion. "I'm not the most talented designer and there are people far more clever and far more artistic in design than I am, so when Bernard called me to be the production designer, I kind of felt like an imposter because it's just that I have a lot of experience, have made a lot of mistakes learning my craft, and surround myself with good and talented people. A big part of my success was that my clients were very gracious and willing to take creative risks with me because I got bored and wanted people to walk into a conference and be entertained. I learnt that you can create sets, depth and things that look like structures with the use clever mapping on LED screens, and that is why in the panto we have a Proscenium arch, which when people enter the theatre, looks like a 3D structure because I've learnt how to use forced perspective."

The set is simple to cover all the bases. Said Andrew, "If you remove all the images, it consists of a backdrop that opens and closes, two wings, a pros arch and a strip screen. I played it safe because I hadn't worked with Janice Honeyman before. I knew she would want all types of looks and sets, so I chose the most versatile canvas that would allow me to put virtually any design onto."



Great respect ensued between Janice and Andrew. “I love getting notes from people who know what they are talking about, and her notes are spot on,” he adds. “For someone who has done this for so long, Janice is incredibly open. I’d come up with a crazy idea like the ‘Transformation Machine’ where instead of following the usual plot of the play, we send Cinderella through a machine to transform her into her ballgown. I never thought Janice would buy it, but she did, and I was left to thinking, heck, how are we going to pull that off? Janice is a visionary and I see myself as someone to help her realize her vision. She was very gracious in thanking me for guiding her through the new process, but I’ve learnt way more from her.”

A screen is only as good as its content, and the process started with Janice submitting reference material of what she wanted. “Where I didn’t like an idea, I would try to suggest something way better, and sometimes she went for it, so it was a lovely process. The animation team, headed by Charl Joubert, created a 3D render of a stage set, never just a flat design, which enabled her to see the set and animation in 3D. This really helped the process of fine-tuning the material. “There are many creative directors who have a library of existing content, but I like to create bespoke imagery and to then map it,” Andrew elaborated. “Mapping is a big part of the show and why so many of the sets look genuinely three dimensional. In the barn scene with the Buttons and Cinders, a barn door is perfectly mapped to an LED screen so it’s difficult to tell if it’s real or not. We also map objects like the fireplace in the kitchen so that the edges of the hearth wall are mapped to the edges of the screen. That’s what fools the audience’s eye and helps with the

willing suspension of disbelief instead of just a graphic plastered onto a screen.”



Part of the success of the show is the amazing team who have worked remarkably hard to achieve a standing ovation. These include lighting designer Johan Ferreira, and operating the Hippotizer's via a grandMA2 light, Glenn Duncan. “I have to speak about Glenn for a moment because in all the shows I've done previously, the programmer can make or break a scene if the timing is not spot on. Glenn has attention to detail second to none and he understood the brief, concept and spent many, many hours programming to get it right. He was always happy to redo things and has a wonderful temperament which is important in this business.

It was disappointing not to take the family to see the pantomime in 2020, but there's still time to book your seats for the stellar cast presenting *Cinderella*, which will be on the Nelson Mandela stage at The Joburg Theatre until 24 December 2021. Book your seats now and help theatre get back on its feet.

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