

Passing on the Craft: Basic Theatre Flyman Training Held in Johannesburg

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Some of the most important roles in theatre happen behind the scenes. The audience may never notice them, but without skilled flymen, the magic on stage simply cannot happen.

To help preserve and pass on this specialised craft, Gearhouse Splitbeam, in association with DWR Distribution, recently hosted a Basic Theatre Flyman Training course at the Teatro at Montecasino. The inaugural training session, held on 1 April, attracted representatives from theatres across the country, all eager to learn the fundamentals of theatre flying systems from

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some of South Africa's most experienced practitioners.



“For many years, I have wanted to host flyman training,” said Alistair Kilbee, Managing Director of Gearhouse Splitbeam. “It is one of those theatre roles that often goes unnoticed, yet it is absolutely essential. A good flyman is like a good followspot operator, you only notice them when something goes wrong. I wanted to help change that perception and hopefully inspire more technicians to become interested in this highly specialised craft.”

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For Alistair, choosing the right trainers was critical. Rather than relying solely on theory, he wanted participants to learn from people with decades of hands-on experience.

“Rob Young from DWR is a master when it comes to the manufacture of flying systems, while lighting consultant and freelancer Denis Hutchinson has been involved in the construction of flying systems in the majority of theatres around the country,” he explained. “Together with Keith Pugin from DWR, they brought an incredible depth of knowledge and practical insight. Their experience is something that simply cannot be learned from a textbook.”

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The training also benefited from the expertise of veteran flymen Stephens Olifant and Hammilton Sefara, with whom Alistair has worked for more than twenty years.

“They are among the most professional, passionate and highly skilled flymen I have ever worked with,” he said. “We all recognise that none of us are getting any younger, and there is a responsibility to ensure that the next generation of theatre technicians receives as much knowledge as possible while we are still able to share it.”

The beginner-level course introduced participants to single and double-purchase handline flying systems, covering essential terminology, operating procedures and safety practices. Delegates learned how to balance loads, call moves and communicate effectively during performances, while practical sessions provided valuable hands-on experience in bar lashing, knot-tying and running show cues.

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The Teatro generously opened its doors for the training, providing an ideal environment for both theory and practical learning.

Organisers hope this will be the first of many future training initiatives aimed at developing technical theatre skills in South Africa and ensuring that valuable industry knowledge continues to be passed on.

Gearhouse Splitbeam extended its gratitude to Duncan Riley and the DWR Distribution team for their support in making the training possible.

“The investment in the future of our industry was evident throughout the course,” said Alistair. “We are incredibly grateful for the partnership and look forward to growing this and other theatre training opportunities in the years ahead.”