Robe shines in Sister Act South Africa

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Photos courtesy Louise Stickland

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There's no greater 'goosebump moment' for any LD than audible gasps of amazement from a crowd reacting to a lighting or visual effect … that's what happened each night in the Joburg Theatre, downtown Johannesburg as a truly spectacular 'rose window' – made up of 89 x Robe LED moving lights – was revealed for the first time during the new South African production of "Sister Act".

Production Designer Declan Randall united all visual elements – lighting, video and set – in a beautifully colourful collage of finesse and visual imagineering to match the pace and vibrancy of the show. With a cast featuring some of the best South African musical theatre talent, directed by Award winning Janice Honeyman and produced by Bernard Jay, it received rave reviews and sold-out audiences.

Declan – a South African now living in the UK – lit Starlight Express a couple of years ago at the same venue for the same production team, who loved his work … and asked him back to add his magic to Sister Act.

He began working on ideas seven months before the show opened, back in December 2014, and immediately knew that he needed a rose window of light! "All roads led to this!" he exclaimed. So that was the starting point for the lighting.

The structure came in at the end of Act 1, and for the top and end of Act 2 … and looked simply awesome!

It took a little time to work out the geometry.

It was made out of a series of concentric aluminium rings designed in sections to make rigging practical, and when it came to choosing lighting fixtures they had to be lightweight as well as being bright and versatile enough to help create both the sense of a stained glass window, and the idea of strong beams of

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‘sunlight’ streaming through.

Declan is a big Robe fan and so he started with a single LEDWash 1200 in the centre and then incorporated 24 x LEDWash 600s, 16 x LEDWash 800s and 48 x LEDBeam 100s to make up the magnificent centrepiece.

The LEDWash 800s were pulled from the theatre’s own in house rig, the LEDBeam 100s were supplied by MJ Event Gear (facilitated by DWR Distribution), and theatre lighting specialists Gearhouse Splitbeam supplied everything else.

All the fixtures were run in wide mode giving individual ring control for extra dynamics, and the whole piece consumed 7 DMX data universes for control!

Once Declan had established the concept in his head, other scenic and architectural elements of the set,

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like the arches – four large sets of flying portals – to frame the rose window, started to emerge.

Declan also utilised the theatre's 18 x Robe MMX Spots in his design and their 18 x ColorWash 700s in his overhead rig, together with a selection of 1K and 2K profiles, fresnels, a load of PARs, 96Kw of cyc lighting, fairy lights, some additional moving lights, 7 x Patten 23s for the retro nightclub rig, plus a host of practicals.

The MMX Spots produced most of the overhead gobo work and specials, and are among his favourite fixtures.

"I use Robe products when I can. The output and the colour are good and they are really reliable," he stated, adding that he likes the zoom and the gobo selection of the MMX Spot.

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In terms of an overall look for Sister Act, Declan wanted it to feel cinematic. The show is based on the hit movie starring Whoopi Goldberg and Maggie Smith, and although, naturally, lit in a completely different style, Declan wanted to evoke the same sense of ‘suspended disbelief’ as good film lighting would also do.

The show featured both front and rear projection and much of the meticulous scenic detail was created with content stored and replayed via a Catalyst media server.

The show was programmed and run on a grandMA2 full size, which also triggered the Catalyst.

Declan worked alongside Assistant Designer Joe Lott, one of his second year Creative Lighting Control students from Rose Bruford College in Kent where he is also a part-time tutor.

Joe took care of the AV programming, editing and content creation. They spent a month on site during the tech period, and before then heavily WYSIWYG’d the rose window and were also able to complete a good amount of previsualisation. Another Rose Bruford student, Andrew Bruce, assisted with the WYSIWYG programming.

This helped enormously on site where they were – unsurprisingly – really pushed for time and under pressure to produce such intricate results.

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All the hard work has not gone unnoticed with critics, observers and fans clamouring to post their positive reactions.

“The production design by Declan Randall is sumptuous, magnificent … The scene changes are as razor sharp and effective as film editing… Sister Act is better than the movie could ever be. It dazzles with its finely timed choreography and sweeps you off your feet with its dazzling ensemble acting and spirited, enthusiastic dancing. It will blow your mind right out of the winter chills” effused *Leon van Nierop, artslink.co.za, …* just one of many who were WOWed.

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