

Robe Supports Lir Academy Gradfest

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An exciting new collaboration between Robe and Dublin's acclaimed Lir National Academy of Dramatic Art sees a quantity of Robe moving lights – including T1 Profiles and T1 Fresnels, LEDWash 300 LEDs and ParFect 150s – made available on long term rental, which were used to great effect for Lir's 2020 Gradfest event.

This featured four back-to-back new productions presented in Lir's two studio spaces, all lit by students completing their master's degrees in fine art, for which Gradfest was a final segment requiring completion before they gained their qualifications.



The Lir's conservatory training for students of theatre, film and television offers a dynamic fusion of creative and technical disciplines with bachelor degrees in Acting, a general foundation course

for Theatre, master's degrees for Lighting, Set and Costume Design, Playwriting and Direction and a BA in Stage Management & Technical Theatre.

Lir's head of lighting Eve D'Alton explained that Gradfest is a stepping-stone that truly galvanises the skills of the MA students, who work with industry professionals on designing and producing their shows to exceptional standards. It's also an exacting experience for the final year Stage Management and Technical Theatre students who help crew and facilitate these four diverse productions.



This year the four were “Image of a Young Unknown Woman” Elinor Cook’s disturbing examination of violence and revolution; “Constellations” by Nick Payne which looks at the almost limitless possibilities of life and how the smallest changes can dramatically alter people’s designated courses; “Salome, or the Cult of the Clitoris: A Historical Phallusy” by Mitchell Polonsky, a devised piece referencing an infamous libel trial following the Independent Theatre’s censored 1918 production of Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé*; and “Wish List” by Katherine Soper, a powerful work questioning the worth of human labour and how to tackle life with all the systems stacked against you.

Four very diverse and equally challenging works were presented, fully socially distanced, with all the passion, emotion and power of theatre, drama and potent storytelling in the Lir’s two studio theatres ... all of which had to be turned around within the space of six weeks.



The three lighting designers involved were Israel del Barco who lit “Image of an Unknown Young Woman”, Roberto Ventruti for “Salome, or the Cult of the Clitoris” who also designed the set for this Studio 1 piece, and Blue Hanley who lit “Constellations” and “Wish List” in Studio 2.

The usual Gradfest procedure includes a week of tech for each show to enable the directors to be as flexible as possible in crafting their work, but ultimately, still a highly pressured timescale.

This flexibility was especially critical this year with the Covid situation – and this was where the additional Robe lights – in particular the T1 Profiles and Fresnels – really made a huge difference to the level and style of shows that could be produced.

The deal to secure the Robe kit for the Lir actually started at the 2018 PLASA expo in London, when Eve and Lir technical director Barry Conway met with Robe UK’s sales director Ian Brown who looks after the Irish Republic territory. They already enjoyed a great relationship with Robe UK, are enthusiastic participants in Robe’s NRG (Next Robe Generation) initiative, plus several students have visited the factory in the Czech Republic which is the epicentre of Robe’s manufacturing operation.



Once the kit was in place at the start of 2020, Robe UK's field sales support Amy Kerr visited and ran some training workshops which was the first opportunity for students to get hands-on with the new fixtures.

Then Covid-19 hit, the first lockdown was imposed and teaching generally shifted to online as everyone grappled with trying to continue with what was then known as the 'novel' coronavirus.

Roll on a few months, and as the first lockdown eased slightly, being a practice-based institution, Lir was able to continue teaching and engaging in productions ... albeit without live audiences.

For Gradfest, the four T1 Profiles and four T1 Fresnel Washes were installed in Studio 1 and the shutters and beam shaper features respectively enabled LDs to pick out and delineate specific areas on the stage and set for actors. This took on new and important significance as the performances had to be socially distanced.

The T1 series is designed by Robe specifically for theatrical applications and every feature has been refined with this in mind, including fantastic tungsten emulation effects and super-smooth dimming which were also "perfect" for these productions says Eve, in the context of combining with the Lir's existing conventional house lighting rigs.



An additional challenge for the three Gradfest lighting designers this year was that they had to start the creative process during lockdown and draw up their first drafts without access to the actual rooms! This is when the value of the product training earlier in the year really helped!

Instead of live audiences, this year the shows were all streamed live instead, so apart from being enjoyed by a real audience, friends and families, agents and casting directors could still view the professionalism and scout the talent of everyone involved.

The production team – including chief LX Darragh Cavanagh – and the students also had to contend with the new and evolving Covid-19 safety protocols.

Eve elucidated, “They rose to the occasion with all the enthusiasm and invention you would expect from Lir students. The standards of production and levels of safety remained high and became integral to the learning process.”

Working collaboratively and remotely simultaneously was another ‘new normal’ aspect of the process and to accommodate the extenuating circumstances, deadlines for certain elements of the production and design processes were changed, with a lot more emphasis focussed on planning and logistics. For example, the 6 to 8 hours normally allowed for plotting in the venue was swapped to pre-vis and 3D modelling of the spaces.

Time management was different, and rigging, build and tech schedules all had to factor in keeping distance and how that affected things like physically making or shifting scenery and set pieces and rigging lighting and audio.

This was particularly important with the smaller fixed grid setup of Studio 2 where Blue Hanley designed a composite rig for her two shows, with the LEDWash 300s and ParFect 150s at the core of the design for maximum flexibility and adaptability, and to capture the style and aesthetics of the two very different works.

Gradfest predictions are traditionally crewed by six first-year students who this year worked in 'pods' and, within that, operated a deputization structure to they could all theoretically cover for one another if someone had to drop out and isolate or stop working for another reason – which happily was a precaution not needed!

For the close contact work like lifting, manoeuvring and specific technical processes, the crew worked – fully PPE'd – in 'buddy pairs'.

All of this and having the Robe fixtures on hand made the 2020 Gradfest a very special event that everyone was very excited to help deliver.

Eve comments, "I am extremely proud of the hard work that has gone into making our 2020 Gradfest happen. In the most challenging times for our industry, both staff and students have proven that the arts and culture are viable and necessary industry and can be produced safely and to the highest standards.

"Robe has always been a great supporter of young technical talent and having that available throughout the year to our students has definitely helped them attain higher potential and create new and innovative ways of working."

Robe UK's head of marketing Theresa Gibson stated, "The students and tutors at The Lir Academy delivered an inspirational GradFest2020 with great success, despite the challenging circumstances and restrictions posed by the Covid-19 pandemic."

Theresa reiterated that it was "wonderful" to see the Robe kit in action aiding the learning experience by enabling greater flexibility for the lighting designers, programmers and operators and assisting in delivering four outstanding productions.

"We are proud to collaborate with the Lir Academy, especially as we have a number of students from the Lir both past and present who are members of our NRG (Next Robe Generation) community.

"Supporting such amazing up and coming talent in our industry is more important than ever and the high calibre shows produced for GradFest2020 was a fantastic example of everyone's work and achievements."

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Photos: Keith Dixon