

Roland Greil Workshop inspires South Africans



It all began at Prolight + Sound in 2015. Duncan Riley of South African based DWR Distribution recalls sitting on a bench, having lunch outside a sausage shop, when Sarah Rushton-Read of The Fifth Estate said, “Oh Duncan I want you to meet Roland Greil because I know that the two of you will get on well and put up something together in South Africa.”

They exchanged numbers and this was the start of a friendship and inspiring workshops presented by Roland, the most recent being in February this year. “The meeting was outside of product and it wasn’t surrounded by manufacturers,” says Duncan. “It was simply meet this person because something will come out of it in the future and that’s exactly what happened. It was all thanks to the lovely Sarah who connected us.”

Since then, Roland Greil, lighting designer, director and programmer for great names in the music industry such as The Rolling Stones, Adele, Phil Collins and Rammstein has presented three workshops in conjunction with DWR in South Africa. On his own capacity, he has visited the country 13 times. The beautiful South Africa also tugs at his heartstrings as it’s here where he proposed to his wife Shannon.



Joshua Cutts, Roland Greil and Duncan Riley

Roland's first training course in the country was in 2016, where he focused on lighting design, video mapping and working on a production. In 2017, he joined forces with legendary Patrick Woodroffe, where the pair delved into the history of rock-and-roll lighting, illustrating their presentation with slides and videos pertaining to The London Olympics 2012, Michael Jackson's show that never was and an Adele concert. More recently in 2020, Roland shared the stage with one of South Africa's most passionate lighting designer, Joshua Cutts, for a lighting workshop hosted at the Mozaiek Teatro in Fairland, as he focused on concert touring lighting, the Rammstein production, and explained his process of putting a show together from the initial idea being scribbled on a piece of paper right through to the production design, emphasizing that the success relies on teamwork.

Roland's introduction to the entertainment industry goes back to childhood when his dad took him to a country and western music concert. "For whatever reason, little Roland saw the guy behind the mixing board and was fascinated," Roland fondly recalls. "At that moment I made the decision not to become a firefighter or a pilot when I grew up. Instead, my plan at age seven, was to become a sound engineer."

His next Christmas present was an inexpensive mixing board and he gradually started building lighting systems with components purchased from the convenience store which he in turn would hire out. Fast forward to 1996, and Tina Turner's Wildest Dreams tour was heading for Munich. "By hiring items from other small local rental companies, I was now in contact with the more professional industry. Somebody asked me if I wanted to be a stagehand. I didn't even know what a stagehand was, but it sounded amazing. I had to be in Munich early in the morning and I thought 'I'd made it. I was going to work with Tina Turner! Ultimately, I ended up putting up 10,000 fold-up chairs (not by myself), and the passion just grew from there."

When he saw people rigging lights and speakers, Roland wanted to be the guy doing that work! "So, step by step that pattern followed throughout my career," he says. "I took certain steps to be a technician and to tour the world. Then I saw somebody programming a lighting desk and thought it would be cool if I could do that. Then I'd think how great it would be to work with a certain band. I was lucky enough to obtain most of my career

dreams or goals thus far.”



In the techie days, Roland Greil

Early in the game, Roland ended up steering away from sound. “While live sound is an art and definitely a craft, it’s very academic and if you know your physics you can make it work. I found myself more interested in creating something new with lighting, which evolved to video, and in time, the designer of the entire production. I always enjoyed creating things and playing with ideas, even on a very small scale. I always say that you learn your craft doing a club gig with twelve parcans! That is way more difficult than creating something special with eight hundred moving lights and all the money in the world.”

Roland has been privileged to work alongside some of the best people in the industry, people like Patrick Woodroffe, Adam Bassett and others around the world. “I learned from them but also built my own opinion and my own way of doing things over the years which is interesting. I’m still enjoying it and I always use the analogy that it’s like being a kid in a toy store. The only difference between man and boy is the size of their toys.”



It's important for Roland to share his knowledge. "For instance, I wrote a book a few years back about creating a lighting design. It was something that was missing when I was young. In Germany to date, there is no formal education on lighting design. It's all learning by doing. It would have helped me a lot if I had the opportunity to listen to someone who had the experience. I am hoping to give something back to the up-and-coming youngsters and hopefully, they'll realize their dreams no matter how big they are."

Joshua Cutts of Visual Frontier, who shared the stage with Roland at the most recent workshop agrees. "Our country is yearning for information and our industry want to learn as much as it can from the international market. To have someone like Roland share his stories on productions that we've all seen and wondered how they pulled it off, is a fantastic experience. In the South African market, our minds are exploding with ideas and ways to explore the industry. I think we have such an intelligence base of lighting designers and operators in the country that just don't have access to massive amounts of equipment, and we have to think of new ways to implement the ideas with the tools that we have."



An important lesson Josh shared at the workshop is simply for lighting designers not to compare themselves with anyone else. "Each person is unique and the more you try to be some else, the less you will become yourself. Treat everyone on the show with respect, be passionate about your work and handle every project with the same commitment, no matter how large or small."

Duncan Riley of DWR always has the vision to try and bring people together. The Roland Greil Workshop succeeded in drawing in around 170 people including the key players in the industry as well as students from universities. "I'm very grateful to Roland and Joshua for giving of their time. It's important to pull inspiration from people and it's great for youngsters to see that with hard work and imagination all things are possible. A big thanks to the DWR team for putting this event together and last but not least, to the Mozaiek Church for hosting us."