

Sasani's new LSC dimming system

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The entire backbone of Stage Two and Stage Five at Johannesburg's Sasani Studios, previously known as ZSETV, has been upgraded and future-proofed with a new dimming system comprising of 24 LSC Gen VI, supplied and installed by DWR Distribution. The LSC technology replaces dimmers in the studio that were custom designed and hand built for South Africa's very first soap opera, *Egoli*, which had its first episode aired on M-Net on 6 April 1992 and which consequently ran for 18 years, placing Sasani on the map as the soap doyens of the South African television industry.



"I am an older generation broadcast engineer who is passionate about serving the broadcast industry," said André Vorster, Senior Engineer at Sasani Studios who has been with the company for a remarkable 25 years. "It's the passion that drives us, and then on the funny side, we are all too busy to even think about moving on. The technical team have serviced a broad client base over a large period of time, giving Sasani the excellent reputation it has today."

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Soap operas have become the studio's core business with productions like *Rhythm City*, *Scandal*, *7de Laan*, *Isidingo*, *Skeem Saam*, and there are also two studios available for short-term day-to-day recordings which include being home to several *Big Brother* series, *The Voice South Africa*, Nigeria, Angola and Francophone and several other game shows like *Take me Out*, *The Game Show* etc. Sasani has a state-of-the-art post-production facility that can be rented out and which is very competitive with the current technology found globally. "Sasani prides itself in staying current with technology," said André. "We try and stay ahead of the game, because at the end of the day this is a money saver."

With all the success Sasani has enjoyed in recent years, it's humbling to know that over two decades ago the company was a Video Lab Group partner that accepted the challenge of venturing into the soap opera world in association with Franz Marx Films, who had secured a contract to produce *Egoli*, the country's first soapie. *Egoli* is derived from the Zulu word meaning place of gold, an alternative name for Johannesburg. "Basically, having done all the research and development on that project and having put things into place, it was a whole green fields project to Sasani as soapies were not run at that level in the broadcast industry at the time. We had to pioneer the system technology and the infrastructure that is found in all our soapies today."

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The *Egoli* contract set the bar. “We were met with budget restraints at the time as Franz Marx Films and the then ZSETV had a year to prove to broadcaster M-Net that the production would be a success. There was also not a lot of money to launch *Egoli* and a short period to build and commission the dimmers, which were not as freely available as they are now simply because the same technology was not available.”

Kim Smith, Head of Engineering, found a person willing to design and build the dimmer packs that were similar to what the specification deemed would be required for the original *Egoli* startup. “The dimmers were handmade, and the chap who built them contracted out the metal work for the dimmer frames,” said André. “Kim at the time advised him that we needed a kind of a modular dimmer so that if they went faulty we could remove one dimmer and not have to remove the entire pack to repair it. We gave him a basic overview of what we required and it ended up that the same dimmers were used extensively for a period of twenty-five years! I think if you have a look at them, they served us really well but they had a lot of downsides.”



The downside was that as the years went on, it became a struggle to find components to maintain them. The system did not have the luxury of having integrated DMX so they required external DMX boxes and there were other points of failure. The final output devices that they

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used had become very expensive, due to scarcity and from a production point of view, because of the older design of the dimmer, there was a lot of inherent noise which plagued productions. Because of the way soapies are filmed, the technical team use microphones that are normally extended quite close to the lights and the gantry where the dimmers are housed. From time to time we would have the buzz of the actual chokes in the dimmers being received on the microphones.

Sasani's management began planning and budgeting for the replacement of the old packs.

"The old dimmers, being cruder, used what is known as Amplitude dimming," André explains. "The newer technology uses Phase dimming, that makes them super silent and super-efficient."



Ever since installing the LSC dimmers, where DWR managed to secure super silent chokes installed by LSC, they have been running without fail other than one or two little niggles after the initial startup. "We've had absolutely no complaints from our client, we've had no failure so we've gone from a system that was starting to gradually let us down to a product where we've got a one hundred percent happy client as far as the lighting side of the production side is concerned. This is very important for us because unlike most other television productions, soapies run all day, every day from early in the morning till late at night."

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JP De Vernon from DWR says the new system includes a complete dimmer and a custom-built patch bay system. "We decided to go with a total of 24 LSC Gen VI, which is an Advanced Dimming System that allows you to configure the channels to either dim or to provide hot power to LED and moving lights," JP said. "The custom-built patch bay, consisting of 16 in total, was designed by DWR with hours spent on drawing and design concepts. We were very pleased that André and his team were satisfied with the end result."



All the technology in the world would be useless without the people behind the scenes. "You need to be passionate and enjoy the pictures that you are creating, you need to be proud of what you see on air and also you need to have a happy client that leaves the site because when a happy client leaves the site they will always talk about the experience that they had," said André. "The experience is what we want because it's behind that, that others will want to carry out their projects at Sasani."

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