

## Soweto Theatre

*Words & photos with kind courtesy Sarah Rushton-Read*



Denis Hutchinson and lighting designer, Wesley France

**Soweto, South Africa** – Sculptural and striking, the brand new Soweto Theatre is a bold, brightly coloured beacon to progress on the dusty red landscape of the Sowetan skyline. The first ever theatre to be built in the former township, it's three primary coloured cuboid venues, curved buttress walls and tented entrance command attention from miles around.

Already in receipt of its first award for its positive impact on its surroundings, the Soweto Theatre opened on Africa Day – May 25th 2012 – to a delighted public. Built as part of a multi-million Rand regional regeneration project, the venue is the clever design of architects Afritects with theatre consultancy provided by respected set and lighting designer Denis Hutchinson.



“Soweto Theatre has attracted a wealth of local skill and talent during its delivery,” explains Hutchinson. “Local entertainment technology distributors including DWR Distribution, Prosound, Sound Harmonics and a number of others have all supplied and furnished local Sowetan installation firm Muthiyane Trading – run by Aubrey Ndaba

– with the necessary equipment and expertise. All are passionate about what they do and believe in what the Soweto Theatre can offer its community. All have been immensely supportive throughout the build.”



From the outset a key part of the building remit was to involve the local community as far as possible. “This is where Aubrey and his team came in,” explains Hutchinson. “Aubrey, who lives in Soweto, employed local people and also worked in close co-operation with the South African Roadies Association (SARA) – a training organisation – to ensure the next generation of backstage workers were given an opportunity to work at the theatre.

Throughout the construction phase much of the casual labour was drawn from the immediate environs and SARA. Admittedly this could slow the process at times. However it also provided the necessary up-skilling local people wanted and has brought economic benefit to the local community, which is equally important.”

Designed to become part of the fabric of Sowetan life, the theatre features three tiled, primary coloured cuboids each of which encapsulates a theatre: Red is the main proscenium theatre with a capacity of 436, Blue is the large studio, capacity 152 and yellow is the small studio, capacity 88.

All three cubes are partially enveloped and linked together both backstage and FOH by curved, metal clad exterior walls, the bases of which have been carefully shaped to provide suitable camber for skateboarding. FOH is split between an outside high tensile, tented terrace and one contained within the curved walls of an airy, full height, glass fronted foyer.



Just one week before the theatre was due to open, Hutchinson, having returned to his day job, could be found busy programming the opening show – The Suitcase – alongside lighting designer Wesley France and head of lighting Nkululeko Mazibuko.

As the build drew to a close ‘Hutch’ had been splitting his days between snagging the venue’s lighting, sound and comms systems and programming the lighting for first show. Some say that working a show in a brand new theatre is the most expedient way to test any venue. However programming the lighting and overseeing the testing must surely push the limits of anyone’s boundaries.

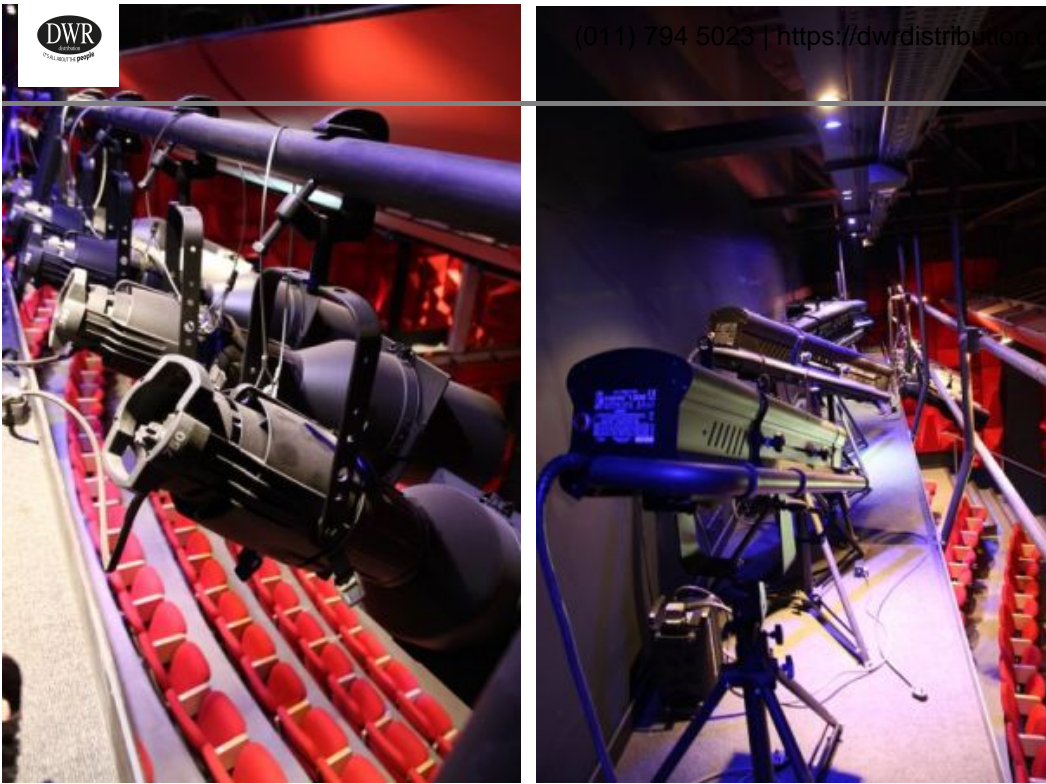
Nevertheless Hutch’s approach to the project is pragmatic, modest, and full of pride. He is by no means alone in this. The same pride oozes from every possible pore of the design, supply, install and build team as it does from the FOH staff.

Sited opposite the Jabulani Stadium, made famous for the meetings held during the Soweto uprisings, the Soweto Theatre foyers afford a striking view at every level over the sprawling municipal and to the Suikerbosrand mountain range beyond. It’s amazing to think that this venue would have been inconceivable just a few years ago; today it signifies everything that is remarkable, proud, hopeful and inspired about the region and its people.

Inside the main auditorium one is immediately struck by its warm intimacy and comfortable acoustic. Plush red seating, cuboid three-dimensional wall linings and a relatively large stage combine with a fairly steep auditorium rake and the horseshoe curve of the circle to ensure the theatre has a classic intimacy that feels pleasingly familiar.

No surprise given that it has drawn some of its inspiration from London’s Young Vic and a plethora of other international houses.





What is delightful is that The Soweto Theatre is not about trophy technology and shiny gadgets (although it has its fair share) but more about providing a stimulating, exciting creative environment where excellent performance can be hosted; where local people can express and enjoy themselves and where people can imagine, share and learn.

Theatre making is not hidden but in many ways exposed for all to see, touch and feel. Lighting and sound control is sited in full view of the audience. There are no complex data distribution systems; Hutch has specified cables, sockets, multicores – and in the main analogue tie lines. Everything is exposed, easy to trace and to understand. Equipment has been carefully chosen to deliver robust usability, efficiency and flexibility. There are no pretensions; any theatre company or performer can turn up, turn it on and put on a show.



Indeed the choice of lighting equipment comes very much from Hutch's real world design experience and advice taken from suppliers DWR Distribution and Prosound. For the main house, following a like for like shoot out Hutchinson chose to specify ETC Fresnels and Source Four profiles as he discusses: "The Source Four Fresnels were a late entry into the competition. ETC flew a unit out and I put it up next to a couple of other options. I was pleasantly surprised. The output was impressive for a 750w fixture. They're solidly built and I think they're going to work very well. It also means that virtually all of the generics will use the same lamp reducing the need to stock loads of different bands and types, also very useful in terms of running costs."

Ian Blair of Prosound, who supplied the kit to the theatre says: "We supplied a total of 216 Source Fours across the three performance spaces, including 72 of the new Source Four Fresnels, which were only introduced into South Africa in January of this year. The new Fresnel's optical system provides excellent performance lighting at a lower wattage and is ideal for a theatre where saving power is one of it's key priorities."

Prosound also supplied a large number of accessories including barn doors, top hats, irises, Gobo holders, boom arms and lens tubes. In addition, Electrosonic SA supplied ADB Warp/Ms front of house and Martin TW1s onstage, both chosen for their quiet operation, which is essential in what is essentially a drama/dance theatre.

Hutch also specified a number of Philips Selecon Arena 2k Fresnels. "I selected the Arena for the necessary punch required for key light, says Hutch. "The Arena is one of the best 2kW Fresnels on the market – and I've worked with most of them. They also feature a very smooth, even field and excellent light output."

Also included in the main theatre are a number of Robe Robin 600E Spots and 300 LED washes. "The Robe Robin 600 Spots have a fantastic light output for the power consumption and are great for delivering gobo washes and beam effects while the 300LEDs are parcan killers for saturated colour back light. While not as quiet as the Warps and TW1s they are quite usable in a dramatic situation as well as for a little more flash when musical programmes are presented."

Philips Selecon Aurora four way floods facilitate Cyc lighting and Philips Strand Lighting Wall Rack dimmers provide dimming in every space. DWR's Duncan Riley discusses: "Hutch chose the Philips Strand wall racks because he wanted to maximise working performance space and capitalise on flexibility in all spaces without the need for dedicated dimmer rooms."

All spaces are multi-configurable. "It's important to bear in mind that this is a region where there is absolutely no theatrical tradition," explains Hutch. "To a certain extent you have to try and keep it really simple. In all spaces the lighting and distribution system comprises a number of multicores terminated with Socapex outlets which are deployed around the spaces and on the bars, feeding back to the dimmers. This solution presents the simplest and most efficient way to distribute dimming to exactly where it's needed."

"It's not an obscene number of dimmers," says Hutch. "The main theatre has 216, of which six serve house lights."

Control is via a GrandMA2 Light and in the studios GrandMA2 Ultra Light. Hutchinson is a keen user of the MA lighting consoles for a number of reasons as he explains: "These consoles are totally flexible and extremely stable – crucial in a theatre environment. They maybe small but they are very powerful. I wanted to keep the same protocol running throughout the venue but also the grandMA2 Light and Ultra-Light are completely compatible with the rest of the grandMA range. Since more theatres in South Africa are on GrandMA than any other control, this is really useful for incoming productions from other venues. In terms of training, it's also great that people can learn on a less imposing platform and move up through the range."

Head of lighting, Nkululeko Mazibuko with a grandMA console. Over the stage Hutch has decided on 43 counter-weight fly sets: "Motorised sets are really not affordable for us and given the high unemployment rate in the country at present, let's rather create a few more jobs. I'm also pretty sure that counterweights are greener

and often safer than motors.”

There is a simple orchestra pit, which in time could take a full orchestra lift, but for the time being it is built from Rostra. Because the venue will primarily operate as a receiving house it does not have workshop facilities. “We have been very careful about designing a venue that is compatible with all the drama venues in the country. We’re probably also a great deal better equipped than a lot of those venues so I think people are going to come in and say ‘oh wow, we can do a little bit more,’ which will be fantastic for everyone for all the reasons you can imagine.”

Sound Harmonics supplied and installed an L-Acoustics PA in all venues, Richard Smith of the company is director. “We worked in close collaboration with Denis Hutchinson, the Managing Director of the venue, to deliver the best possible solution for this venue. In the end we chose the L-Acoustics KIVA/KILO PA for all venues with Yamaha digital control.”



“This is actually the third prestigious multi-purpose venue in South Africa, in the last year, to choose an L-Acoustics KIVA/KILO system.” Smith continues. “The main house PA comprises L-Acoustics four KILO Low Extension Speakers and twelve Kiva Line Source Array speakers augmented with four of SB18i Sub Bass Speakers and JBL JRX100 Monitor Wedges. In

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Amp set up comprises: four L-Acoustics LA4 Amplifiers in the mainhouse Amp Rack and one each in a flightcase for the studios. The main house is also using four Crown XLS1500 Stereo Amplifiers to power eight JBL JRX100 Monitor Wedges.



Multiple Channel Mixing Consoles in the studio theatres and a Yamaha LS9 -32 – 64 Channel Console in the main house.

In addition a number of microphones have been specified including: a Shure radio mic system, some SM57s and some instrument mics plus a Shure Beta52 Kick Drum Mics and Beta 98A clip on tom mics and a number of AKG C1000 Condenser mics. We chose a wide range of mics because the theatre did not have a clear artistic policy at the time so we had no idea what the venue would be producing.”

Sound harmonics also specified all the cabling and facility / patch panel lay out in each venue along with the stage management desk and calls system, comms and the video relay for all venues.



“The L-ACOUSTICS KIVA system is ideal for the variety of applications this venue will have to cope with. In this case the performance can be anything from an intimate play to a big musical production, poetry to comedy,” Smith points out. “I knew KIVA would be an effective solution for focusing energy on the audience, with headroom to spare. Also because there are three venues, all of different sizes, scalability was crucial to the purchase decision. We knew that whatever we put into these three venues could and would be moved around, as and when required.”

It's clear that Soweto Theatre is going to be an exciting and lively receiving house that in time will attract bigger and bigger audiences. As the venue matures the hope is that it will have it's own artistic team and become creatively sustainable in its own right. In the meantime it will work in partnership with the local community, national and international artists to establish itself as a destination of choice for theatre companies and audiences, both locally and worldwide.

For the 1 million people of Soweto the theatre stands as a vibrant and dynamic symbol of change and progress. Its delivery continues a hard trodden journey that began many years ago. Today the final destination is looking closer as Soweto fast develops into the buzzing, self-sustaining, desirable cultural, social and business centre it deserves to be.

### ***Studio World***

Both Studio theatres are neat and functional. Internal pillars give each space an element of character, while supporting a mezzanine technical gallery that runs the full circumference of each. From these galleries technicians can access the evenly spaced, fixed lighting bridges that afford designers almost every conceivable lighting position. There is no separate dimmer room and dimming is neat and discrete in the form of Philips Strand Lighting Wall Racks – 120 ways in the larger blue studio and 96 in the small yellow one.

Drapes hang from the inner edge of the mezzanine gallery in each space and facilitate a masked off passage of any configuration. This allows directors to dictate where the audience can and can't go in response to the configuration of the stage and seating. Numerous facility panels on both the upper level and ground level make the spaces incredibly accommodating.

Seating set up is simple. Hutch has specified a system of modular Prolite rostrum, built bespoke by Prosound Pty, to maximise the space available as he explains: “The Prolite system has been a triumph, built of aluminium it's extremely lightweight and quick to set up. We have had some rostra built to custom sizes to allow us to use each space as effectively as possible. The standard size for one Prolite deck is one meter deep, front to back, which in my opinion is too wide for a seating row. 900mm works better for me in a space like this and better





Lighting kit for both studios is plentiful and comprises ETC Source Four profiles and Fresnels. Both studios also have a number of Robe 300 LED Washes. Duncan Riley of DWR Distribution discusses: "The great thing about the Robe 300 LEDWash is that they offer great flexibility and excellent homogenisation of the light source. Colour mixing is smooth and the range of colours achievable is huge. In addition, for a moving head it is lightweight, quiet and compact, ideal for studio theatre use for back light and stage colour washes where space and accessibility can be an issue."

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*Note: This article and the resulting interviews and photographs were only made possible by the generous support of DWR Distribution and the contribution towards my production of Entertainment, Robe, ETC, MA Lighting and Prolite.*



It is important to note that this venue could not have been delivered were it not for the dedication and support of the people and companies that have worked extremely hard to see it to completion. Big fees are not de rigueur in South Africa. As mentioned earlier in this feature even the theatre consultant, Denis Hutchinson, was back at the coalface within weeks! DWR: – DWR is a company that has built its business 100% around the people it works with and for. Well known in South Africa and beyond for its staff's friendly disposition and total commitment to its customers, DWR was established in a garage in 2006 by Duncan Riley. The company has since grown rapidly to occupy offices and three warehouses in the Strijdom Park area of Johannesburg. Today DWR is distributor for a number of internationally reputable lighting and staging brands including Philips Entertainment, Prolite, Robe, Clay Paky, Avolites, GDS and a host of others. However for Duncan Riley and his team the pure joy in their work still comes from the people they work with and the customers they serve.

Sound Harmonics: – Since its formation in 1995, Sound Harmonics has grown into a multifaceted professional audio company offering products, services and expertise in a wide variety of areas within the audio industry. The driving force behind Sound Harmonics is an absolute passion for the industry,



#### **Soweto Theatre – The Staff:**

Carl Johnson – Head of operations

Head of Lighting: – Nkulukeko Mazibuko

Head of Sound: – Lebugang Andrew Mnisi

#### **Lighting – supplied by DWR Distribution:**

Philips Selecon Rama Fresnels

Philips Selecon Aurora 4 way Floods

Philip Strand Lighting – Wall Rack Dimmers

Robe 300 LED Washes

Robe 600 Spots

GrandMA2 Lite

2 X GrandMA2 Ultra-Lite