

The Purr Factory

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Denis Hutchinson designed both the set and lighting for The Purr Factory, directed by Alby Michaels, which is the latest family fun-filled rock musical, performed by the UJ Song and Dance Company. We asked Denis to answer a few questions on the show, which runs from 8 - 25 September 2010 (Wednesdays to Saturdays).

Q: The Purr Factory is delightful and very light hearted. What attracts you to a show like this and how did you get involved?

A: I was the Theatre Consultant for the UJ Arts Centre when it was built five years ago and was asked to light the opening production as part of that. Now the interesting thing about UJAC is that the University does not have an Arts Faculty, let alone a Drama Department, and yet they still built a fully equipped 350-seat theatre. Universities with Drama Departments take note please!

Q: The cast are not official drama students, but they have such “electricity” - is it refreshing to work with a group like this?

A: Every year UJAC stage two student productions: a drama and a musical. The creative team is made up of professionals, but the cast are all students studying everything from Commerce to Theology, and they spend three months of their ‘spare’ time rehearsing to then play about ten performances. From the first time I worked there I was struck by the passion and level of commitment of these kids. They may not have formal drama training, but they are prepared to work their butts off to learn what they need to. There is something amazingly refreshing about that, and as a result, I’ve been more than happy to go back every year for a ‘top up’.



Q:

The set works so well. Please could you describe what spec you had if any and what you wanted to achieve? It's really great.

A: What I really enjoy about scenic design is that it doesn't have to be literal even when it's real. In this case, THE PURR FACTORY has about fourteen locations within the script, but both the director and I felt that what was most crucial was establishing the idea of a cat community, and the set is essentially a warehouse which has been taken over by the cats and within it, sub-communities have established themselves. In this way, the school and the Purr Factory are both physically defined by the warehouse, but emotionally different because of lighting.



Denis Hutchinson
with Duncan & Amy Riley - we loved the show, thank you! **Q: The lighting is professional.
What did you want to achieve or create?**

A: Lighting is always about being sure the cast can be clearly seen (otherwise they may as well fax their performances in) and then providing an atmospheric and emotional underscoring appropriate to the drama of the moment. I can't stress enough how important it is to serve the text and not upstage. I hope I've managed that...

Q: Please could you give me a list of equipment?

A: The theatre has a good stock of Source Fours and parcans as well as a dozen MAC 250 Kryptons and Robert Juliat Topaze follow spots. In addition, DWR very kindly loaned me some demo units: a VL2500 Spot and a Wash, a VLX wash and a Robe Digispot 3000.



Q:

Please give a basic description of where units placed / rigged or positioned.

A: The design of the show is totally asymmetric with a large protrusion into the auditorium stage right. Hanging over this is a ceiling grid that also extends over the auditorium. This kind of asymmetry creates some interesting challenges for a lighting designer as almost all of the

conventional lighting positions in the theatre are at least partially obscured on one side!

As a result, the rig evolved in a similarly asymmetric fashion, and whereas one would normally like to test units in pairs, this rig allowed for (and perhaps grew out of) single demo units.

The grid over the stage was intended to have the twelve MAC 250s, but in order to fit in the speaker cluster in as well, I had to reduce to ten units. As the grid is such a strong visual feature, I wanted to have it as clean as possible, so the only other light hung on it is the VL 2500 spot which is in the most downstage corner right over the audience and virtually totally inaccessible! That should test VL reliability...

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The VL2500 wash balances the spot from a position just upstage of the proscenium on stage left (just off the grid) and the VLX is

hung right up at the theatre grid to light down through all the flybars and the scenic grid creating shadows on the floor and walls.

Finally, the Digispot hangs on the balcony rail and projects short commentaries ('Trouble on the corner of Catfish Road and Nine Lives Lane') onto the side walls of the theatre and is also used both for animated effects and as a LED wash onto the set.



Q:

Any feedback on the Digispot / Vari*Lite or any of the equipment used?

A: I've previously used a pair of Digispots on several shows that exploited the unit far more than this show does, but it remains one of my favourite units particularly as a set designer. And when the light output gets improved...

The Vari*Lites have been very interesting to work with: the VL2500 is the 'new' version of the VL2000 that is currently working hard on MAMMA MIA! in Cape Town and will be seen in Johannesburg from October. I think it's hands down one of the best theatrical units not only for its output and features, but also because of how compact it is: when you have to compete for space in the grid with lots of scenery, size does count.

As for the VLX, the output is great - I'm trimming it at 14m on PURR FACTORY - but I have to say that I hope there will soon be a RGBA version; the yellow/orange part of the spectrum is just not well serviced by (any) RGB units all of which tends towards the khaki rather than the more vibrant colour one would like to be able to use. That said, if you don't need that part of the spectrum on your show it's a great unit.



Q: Did the GrandMA behave?

A: I've never had a GrandMA mis-behave, and it remains my favourite control.

Q: What is the response from the public in general with shows put on at UJ? I feel it's a shame if more people are not experiencing the talent and the lovely theatre there? Is it quite a busy theatre?

A: The theatre is available for hire outside of the period in which there are student productions and is generally booked at least a year in advance. I would love to see more people going to see shows there, but I suspect people assume that as a University Theatre the work is amateur which is not necessarily so. And who says amateur is bad? Or less entertaining? And at least three of the students I've worked with there have finished their 'real' degrees and gone on to successful careers in professional theatre...

Take the kids - thank you Denis that we could bring ours - and enjoy a great show. Ticket cost R60 (R30 for Pensioners, students and groups of 10 or more) at Computicket - www.computicket.com or 0113408000. The Purr Factory is part of the annual Joburg Arts Alive Festival.

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