



The South African State Theatre thinks out of the box!

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The South African State Theatre in Pretoria has been able to employ over 600 performing artists and theatre technicians to create stage productions and work opportunities in a time where the entertainment industry is on its knees. Lighting and set designer, Wilhelm Disbergen, was thankful to be part of this project and has given each show his all, whether it's painting the stage floor or coming up with imaginative looks on his Green Hippo Boreal media server.



Aubrey Sekhabi, The State Theatre's artistic director, knew early in the Covid-19 pandemic that revenue would not be generated from ticket sales, front of house sales, hiring and wardrobe or parking. As a result, he and his team made a calculated decision to make productions available online, allowing patrons to purchase their "tickets" from Webtickets. Remarkably, the theatre started recording their shows six years ago, and now these carefully stowed away gems could run another season, albeit online, while generating additional income and providing viewers with the opportunity to enjoy a night at the theatre in their own homes.



Using the budget they were normally given for in-house productions, and cutting out on unnecessary

expenses, The State Theatre was able to pay artists to perform on their stage, with each show recorded. The project reached out to performers and technicians who are often the sole breadwinners, support extended family, and more likely than not, have no one to turn to for additional income.

With over twenty years' experience in the industry and a mind that spins with colours, ingenious ideas and concepts, Wilhelm Disbergen used his Hippotizer to create backdrops and effects for the performances. "For some of the shows I did the lighting component as well, but for the most part, visiting lighting designers were hired to spread the work and allow more people to benefit from this incentive," Wilhelm explains.



On most productions, Wilhelm had a live feed running from the SDI mixing desk that he could throw onto various projection surfaces or screens along with the performer's name or AV backgrounds. The Hippotizer controlled the 18k laser projector, either used for front projection and mapping, or at other times, for rear projection with a fibre optic cable.

For the SAST Fringe Festival, which featured 31 bands, the technical team filmed a whopping 4 to 8 bands a day. "It was virtually impossible to plot and AV had to be done on the fly," he says. "The Hippotizer was excellent for this."



There were also moments when Wilhelm stirred things up, or should we say, toned things down! “I took a few big risks like stripping the entire theatre stage and then projecting and lighting the bare sound barriers, but it turned out magical,” he grins. “This was all achieved mostly on a zero set budget. Once we were allocated R10 000 for a set, and we used that same set in different configurations for fifteen bands.”



The experience has been humbling. “I have just been incredibly fortunate to be able to work during this Covid-19 nightmare,” says Wilhelm. “And it’s all because a few people at The South African State Theatre realized that they could do something, and did so, at a time when many other organisations did very little, or mostly nothing. The State Theatre provided a platform for much-needed expression, relevance, and work to artists at a time when no one was able to work or earn any income as a performer or technician.”



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Caption:

The State Theatre, a platform for artists during the Covid-19 pandemic.