

“The Wiz Live!” Eases Down the Road with Clay Paky Lighting Fixtures



The Wiz Live!

USA “ NBC continued to own the live theatrical TV franchise with its latest production, “The Wiz Live!,” which drew 11.5 million viewers and critical acclaim for its debut. The visually stunning show, with lighting design by Allen Branton, featured Clay Paky Alpha 800 Profile and Sharpy fixtures in the rig.

Directed by Kenny Leon and Matthew Diamond, “The Wiz Live!” followed “Peter Pan” and “The Sound of Music” in NBC’s continuing series of live theatrical productions. “The Wiz” revamps the classic story of “The Wizard of Oz” with an African-American cast as audiences watch young Dorothy swept up in a tornado, following the yellow brick road to Oz then finding her way home to Kansas.



A Broadway show presented live on television is something of “a hybrid of TV and theater,” notes **Kevin Lawson**, one of three **lighting directors with Felix Peralta and Darren Langer**. “You don’t usually find live scripted shows on television. With TV specials you’re in and out in three to five days. With “The Wiz Live!” we were at Grumman Studios in Bethpage, Long Island rehearsing for seven weeks before the airdate. It was a luxurious amount of time!”

Lawson explains that NBC’s two previous live theatrical productions involved multiple soundstages; the pirate ship and Neverland set pieces for “Peter Pan,” for example, were erected on separate stages. “The choice was to make “The Wiz Live!” more theatrical, set in a stage box. There was an LED scenic back wall and three LED portals that opened and closed and an extensive amount of automated scenery that tracked in and out.”



Queen Latifah as The Wiz (Photo by: Virginia Sherwood/NBC)

Branton and his lighting team collaborated with production designer Derek McLane to establish the mood and look for each scene. “He had very beautiful scene by scene renderings, then we worked out from there with the songs that added dynamics,” he says. “Oz was a fantastic place but Kenny Leon still wanted it to have some rules: You couldn’t do something just because it looked cool; it had to be grounded in some reasoning. That connected things more with the characters and made you believe in the story.”

Fifteen cameras recorded the live production, which enjoyed a rebroadcast before Christmas. “We had to be flexible with the rig so we could light all the actors and scenery,” says Lawson. “And because there was no studio audience and there was live singing, everything on set had to be quiet. That weighed into our choices of lights. We couldn’t have fixtures that sounded like a jet engine overhead.”



Mary J. Blige as Evillene — (Photo by: Virginia Sherwood/NBC)

Lighting vendor **Atomic Lighting** ran tests in its Lititz, Pennsylvania headquarters to compare potential fixtures for the show. “They did decibel readings of fan noise, the lights at rest and moving” where they fell in the noise spectrum,” Lawson explains. “That’s something we don’t care about for live rock shows or award shows, but on a small stage with live singers it was crucial.”

Atomic’s tests revealed that **Clay Paky’s Alpha Profile 800** moving beam shaper was “incredibly quiet. It was the shutterable, hard-edge light we were looking for and the fact that it was small and quiet put it over the top,” says Lawson. “It became our hard-edge workhorse light.”



Pictured: (l-r) Uzo Aduba as Glinda, Shanice Williams as Dorothy, Elijah Kelley as Scarecrow, Ne-Yo as Tin-Man, David Alan Grier as Lion — (Photo by: Virginia Sherwood/NBC)

Branton and his team deployed 60 Alpha 800s. “They were back lights on scenery everywhere, side lights on towers, low shin dance lights and in the overhead truss,” he points out.

Twenty Sharpys were also selected. The Clay Paky contingent formed about half of the total automated fixtures on the show.

“With every production we try to find more ways to use **Sharpys**,” says Lawson. “Everyone has seen its famous pencil beams, and we used them in the Emerald City ballet, which was staged in a nightclub with Sharpy in its Sharpy mode.

“But we also used Sharpys extensively with frost, with gobos, dappling the scenery with a wonderful quality of light that punches through other treatments.”

Francesco Romagnoli, Clay Paky Area Manager for North and Latin America, added, “This was a very high profile project and we were proud to be a part of it. The design team is very accomplished and we congratulate them!”

A.C.T Lighting is the exclusive North American distributor for Clay Paky.