Tony Reade – founder of Rigging SA

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Tony Reade, the founder of Rigging SA, has enjoyed a colourful career, enriched by working with influential and hardworking people. Rigging SA is well known for supplying reliable riggers and quality film rigging equipment but it’s super special to look back to where it all started. You’ll certainly recognize some names and shows and enjoy all the memories!

Where were you born and what memories, while growing up, stick in your mind?

I was born in Salisbury, Rhodesia now known as Harare, Zimbabwe in 1966. We moved onto Fort Victoria (Midlands), now known as Masvingo, in 1976. I was always competitive, excelling in all athletic events, swimming and playing tennis, hockey, cricket, mini rugby,

I was taught to play the piano before my fingers could reach those extended chords. If anything, I could read music.

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Did you get involved in theatre at school?

Theatrically, at the age of five I made a 10-minute appearance in Madame Butterfly (the Opera) and played lead role in a school play of ‘Annie Get your Gun’ in Junior school. On emigrating to South Africa in 1978, I continued with sports especially focusing on rugby, squash and athletics. Pretoria Boys High suited me as the competition was a lot stiffer.

On school holidays my uncle, Nicholas Ellenbogen, would send for me to assist on productions from set build to stage managing. I would say from the age of sixteen, when going on tour with him, was the starting point of my passion for theatre.

How did you find yourself in this industry? What was your first job?





My first paying opportunity was tree felling in Durban after the mini typhoon hit. At a younger age I was hesitant to climb after many falls, but little did I know then that climbing and felling trees would position my confidence in rigging later on. I started working for NAPAC (Natal Performing Arts Council) in 198,7 primarily on the Loft Productions that toured to schools taking theatre to the people, due to my useful generator skills to power the lighting and sound. Later I was dropped in the deep to run the sound and lighting on small productions as well as to make stage appearances.

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And then what?

I was an Assistant Stage Manager at NAPAC Playhouse for the Dramas, Musicals and Ballets which involved the building of massive sets with the aid of counter weighted fly bars which were manually operated. This also contributed to the rigging skills necessary for quick scene changes.

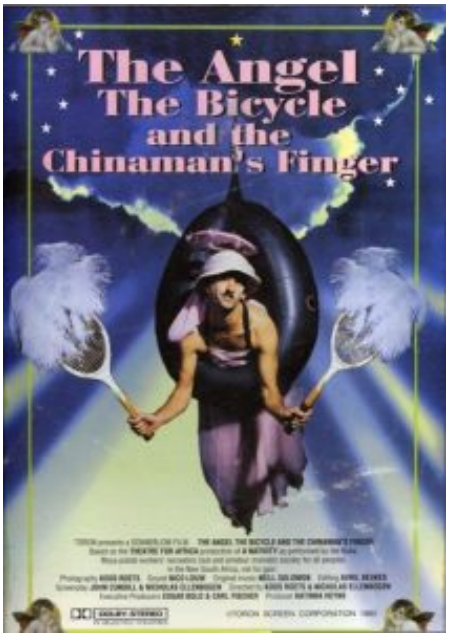
1989 took me to the State Theatre – Performing Arts Council of Transvaal (PACT), on advice from Mark Ransom, in order to acquire the promotion to Technical Stage Manager as I was only 23 and the youngest candidate to achieve this. Mel Pike took me in and under the directorship of Neels Hansen I got to set-up the most extravagant sets in the largest theatres in the country such as Carmen, Turandot, Tosca, Maria Stuarda, Rigoletto, Die Fledermaus and Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. Whilst working here I travelled with the production Camelot which toured to Natal and Free State as I was familiar with these Opera stages.

It was only when Gaynor Young who stood in for Kate Normington on Camelot and plummeted five stories due to lack of safety, that I become obsessed with safety on productions to performer and workers alike.

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I resigned to assist Nicholas Ellenbogen as Technical Director in the creation of ‘Theatre for Africa,’ a pro-environmental theatre company in promoting the World Wildlife Foundation. This involved extensive touring nationally and to Germany, Britain and the Edinburgh Festival. My role required Stage Managing, lighting design and performing. Productions included ‘Horn of Sorrow’ and ‘Kwamanzi’ which won many awards and involvement from the Varty brothers and other experts in Saving the Rhino.

It was in a production at the Market Theatre, ‘A Nativity’ that caught the eye of Katinka Heyns who decided to make a movie in 1992 with the existing cast of the theatre production. The adaptation was called ‘The Angel, the Bicycle and the Chinaman’s Finger’. This was my first appearance on a feature movie which viewed every year by MNet at Christmas.



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As much as I enjoyed the limelight on stage and experienced what actors enjoyed the most, my most suited position was behind the scenes where the magic was setup.

I returned to NAPAC where I took the position of Resident Stage Manager which put me in charge of all the venues and safe operations thereof. Once a position was open, Joe Friedman took me in as a lighting technician as I missed the creative arts.

Due to executive management turn around and an opportunity offered by Simon James, I took up lighting with Hugh Turner at Sun City. Now I had made it to big league with international concerts performing. This was a completely different mindset on creativity as everything was portable for quick set-ups and dismantles. From 1993-95, I worked on countless rock shows, Miss World and Miss South Africa beauty pageants, boxing title fights, product launches and local bands. Under the helm of Sol Kerzner, the Super Bowl was never quiet.

My highlight was being chosen to work as a high scaffold builder and rigger on the Rolling Stones. I was offered an opportunity in the USA, with good references from international LD’s that toured South Africa. Working as a grip or gaffer in the video industry saw me get work in New York but I realised that I had more exposure to larger gigs in South Africa, so I returned home.

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Mike Jones had just started MJ Lighting and had waited for my return to offer me the Technical Lighting Manager position in October 1995. This involved hundreds of corporate events.

You are the founder of Rigging SA. Can you elaborate?



Staging Dimension was officially created in 1998 on resigning from MJ Lighting and pursuing freelance work as a production/lighting designer/operator/rigger. I wore many company caps on representing just about every known event company in Joburg such as Gearhouse, VWV, AV Unlimited, Sound Corporation, Sound Stylists, Southern Lighting, Strike Productions and True Technical, to mention a few.

I travelled to Australia during the Olympics in 2000 and again found South Africa to be my land of opportunity. 2006 saw a huge slump in the industry for me as evidently change was developing in new skills and technology.

In 2007, I was head hunted to manage the Audio Visual Dept at Oasys Exhibitions by Craig Browning. As the largest exhibition company my highlight here was the involvement in all the

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stadiums for the 2009 FIFA Confederations Cup and 2010 FIFA World Cup.

Rigging SA was formulated in 2012 in partnership with Oliver Wilter as there was a need for specialised rigging in the Film Industry. Specialised in the sense that be it a commercial shoot or feature film, interior or outdoors the impossible had to be made possible regardless of any element, and be executed quickly.

I would say film rigging would be the most challenging and yet exhilarating as it involves theatrical finesse in an industrial manner, with little to no rehearsal time, on a location never before trialed.

Your website is amazing. You have worked on so many movies and productions. What do you enjoy most about your work?

Overall, I am fortunate that I started off in theatre. With the little pay and long hours, this industry taught me discipline and appreciation for the arts. It was the best foundation to springboard from, which allows for no hitches and seamless transitions to a live and responsive audience. It also taught me consistency and repetitive patience, but the highlight was the silence before the tabs would open to …. showtime!

I enjoyed the natural adrenalin rush of a crazed audience and with sweety palms would control a concert behind a Celco Gold, a lighting instrument that was not programable but rather reacted to a predetermined impulse to the mood of the music. Timing was of the essence.

The film industry is different in many aspects and the rigging inherently dangerous. Generally, on exterior shoots whatever is requested, you have to find an immediate solution for. All rigging has to be portable and any changes are made quickly as time means a lot of money.

I would say holistically that all facets of my career have been creative in design, safe with absolute satisfaction on completion.

Do you have a favourite story you remember when working on an event?

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I have so many stories and fond memories of events there are no favourites. No event stands out more than the people I have worked with. It truly is all about the people.

Perhaps to mention a few highlights:

- Meeting with the late legend Abe Feder in 1995 (two years before his passing at age 88), twice while in New York, will always be an inspiration to me. Although not in good health, he was interested in listening to me and passing on valuable advice. His career was star-studded with accolades to lighting the first Pygmalion on Broadway in 1938, lighting the Rockefeller tower and many others.
- Lighting for Nelson Mandela, which was no easy task considering his eyesight was very sensitive. His presence was one of such reverence.
- Invitation to working on Rolling Stones during their Voodoo Lounge Tour at Ellis Park. This was an epic moment with rigging and high scaffold building in the rain

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with some of the top riggers in the world. Although this was rigging and not lighting, I did get to meet Patrick Woodroffe the lighting designer.
- Hanging set or lighting above celebrities is always a concern. Having done this with many film celebs, my favourite was working with Meryl Streep. What a lady.
- Highlights of working on Miss World 1993 with over a 1 000 parcans in the Superbowl at Sun City.
- Miss SA 93 and 94 at Sun City was more of a competition with Tim Dunn as to who could take their respective rigging points down first.
- MTN Gladiators in Nigeria with Oliver Wilter had testing conditions with intense humidity for rigging and problematic for the cameras. Had the roof blown off at one point.
- Ghana's 50th Anniversary celebration which had the 'African Footprint' as its opening act and some chap decided to drop his bottle of water over the Jands Hog I was operating. The show went on as it does using the one half of the desk.
- Logistically the most memorable was the FIFA Confederations Cup in 2009 with FIFA World Cup in 2010 during my employment with Oasys/GL Events. We had to rig lines for field mics across all the stadiums.
- Also aiding in kilometres of power distribution for Gearhouse for The Three Tenors at the Union Building Pretoria.

What do the people in the entertainment industry mean to you?

The people I have worked within the theatre became family and some are family. There are so many people to mention of which some remain very close friends today.

Any funny stories you remember?

This is the entertainment industry and there have been many laughs both backstage and on stage!

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- The funniest ongoing in theatre, or perhaps not to them, were people disappearing off stage and into the orchestra pit during set-ups It’s an instant vanishing act. No one was harmed during these stunts.

- I almost stepped on Paul Simon before he made his appearance on stage at the Playhouse as he was crouched behind me side stage in the dark. He is a short fellow.

- Working on ’Sarafina’ production at the Playhouse in Durban was exciting as I got to walk with Mannie Manim and Joe Friedman as they discussed the lighting requirements. Two lighting legends together and they couldn’t name one light or gel number and were so vague. They knew what they wanted only I didn’t.

- While setting up the after party for Miss World 93 and focusing lights, Grace Jones made an appearance on the dance floor and, on requesting one of her numbers from the DJ, grabbed me for a spin around the floor.

- Had the 2 meter diameter mirror ball in the Super Bowl which was rigged off a fly bar behind the drummer and, on cue, would come down. Only on one occasion, it continued to drop off the bar missing the drummer and rolling around to front stage which the audience thought was part of the act!

- During the Grahamstown Festival on one occasion, the power went out on a dramatic scene. With 3 flashlights and two silver prop trays we continued the

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show to a standing ovation.

- I had a large launch with two stages at the Sandton Convention Centre and was brought in to light it. On arrival they gave me 6 parcans and they wanted two lighting states, one warm the other cold. It took me about two hours to sit and think how I could accomplish this. The client started panicking because I was sitting. I was convinced I was being setup and started looking for cameras. It was perhaps the most challenging job I have ever endured as I realised the more the lights the more options but 6 Parcans could hardly cover two stages. It took more thinking on positioning than rigging the lights.

- I have done a few shows where lighting desks have gone down and dimmers have gone down. One in particular was Anneline Kriel’s summer bikini launch at the Sun City Hotel. The desk popped due to a faulty plug that was changed minutes before show time. The dimmers luckily had dials but were backstage where the girls were changing. Can you imagine what they thought……shame and it was winter outdoors. The show went on.

- On the day I resigned from NAPAC and took a position at Sun City, the Opera stage was set ablaze. I promise it wasn’t me but that’ll definitely be remembered as my last days with the Performing Arts.

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What do you like to do when you have time off to relax?

I never know what to do given time off. I feel guilty if I am not working, as someone else is having to do something I am not there to share. I do enjoy getting outdoors and would love to travel more often. I used to play a game of golf once every four months and gave up on hobbies as I couldn’t complete any due to the nature of the industry. I am constantly thinking and advising on safer ways to rig and have many ideas that I feel need to be implemented but that would mean rewriting the OHS act. It is incomplete and a shamble……but that’s just me.

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