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Robe Rides the Storm

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It's not every day that the chance comes up to light a large-scale musical spectacular starring over 100 majestic Friesland horses, geese, a dog, a falcon ... together a few famous actors and singers as well, so Marc Heinz relished the opportunity of working on "De Stormruiter" (The Stormrider) with a cast that truly ticked the 'diverse' box in every aspect!

Staged in the massive Saksen Hall at the WTC Expo in Leeuwarden, the city in the heart of Friesland, The Netherlands, the event was commissioned by the Royal Friesian Horse Studbook (Koninklijke Vereniging) and the Fader Horse Foundation and produced by Leeuwarden Friesland 2018 as part of the city and region's year as European Capital of Culture.

Marc used 160 x Robe moving lights - BMFLs, LEDBeam 1000s and Spiiders - to help achieve the drama and breath-taking visual scenography needed to bring the huge 60-metre-deep and 80-metre-wide performance space alive. The narrative required the creation of multiple locations and environments.

Marc's stylish lighting magic has appeared in theatres and been seen onstage worldwide. He's also the co-designer (with Andre Beekmans from The Art of Light) for Dutch trance guru Armin van Buuren's "Armin Only" series of world tours.

"De Stormruiter" was directed by Jos Thie, also a collaborator on Armin Only. It is based on an original German folk tale detailing the inherent battle between humans and water, regionally contextualised in this largely reclaimed area by an over-confident dike keeper plus the magnificent line up of equine stars and contemporised by drawing parallels with climate change.

The vast arena was filled with a sand-like mulch for the horses which enthusiastically devoured lumens, so Marc needed seriously bright fixtures, and Robe's BMFL was a natural choice.

The highly realistic set was designed by Harn Naaijer, also part of this regular creative team along with stage manager Margus Spekkers - renowned throughout the industry for his

positive demeanour. It included an 80-metre-long by 2.5-metre-wide scenic dike upstage – traversing the full width of the arena – which split in two and tracked on and offstage. At the back of the dike was a 60-metre-wide projection screen, and along with the floor and the projection screen this also presented some brain-teasers for lighting. Light had to be tightly shuttered to prevent spillage, making dealing with all the upstage action – a lot of which happened on the dike – that bit harder.

Then there was lighting the horses – an art in itself as they are notoriously sensitive and need to be trained to perform in stage lighting and darker conditions.

Additionally, the show was recorded for TV broadcast, so, with only 8 metres of headroom and a large ‘letterbox’ of a space with which to contend, Marc had to utilise all his skills and considerable experience.

“This was the fun as well as the challenge!” he stated cheerily.

Marc also lit some Friesland horse parade shows before, but nothing as complex or theatrical in terms of production as this.

“The BMFL with its power, intensity and the sheer number of variants. was the only real option” he commented.

The 24 x BMFL Spots were positioned on nine overhead LX trusses, and all hooked into a tracking system following 12 of the principal actors.

With the low trim height, it was essential to have lightsources immediately above the cast as traditional FOH follow spots blasting in from the front would have looked ugly and splattered onto the projection screen.

The BMFL WashBeams were dotted all over the trusses and worked hard throughout the show doing all the ‘profile duties’ and more including plenty of specials. Having the additional brightness of the WashBeam together with all the BMFL effects was a bonus and being able to swap between wash or beam mode was perfect. “It doubled my options with the same number of fixtures” confirmed Marc.

The BMFL Blades were on the front trusses, where their precise shuttering was used for solos, specials and practicals. Marc commented that all the different version BMFLs work and combine well together.

The two most downstage LX trusses both had returns onto stage at the corners – making them into a U shape, and the 12 x Spider LED wash beams were hung along these returns. They provided additional key and radiant front lighting from that angle.

“They have a wonderful zoom, a great output and were ideal for this application” stated Marc.

Thirty-four of the 68 x LEDBeam 1000s were placed all in a row on one of the upstage trusses and used throughout the show as distinctive back light to augment all the general lighting looks. They were especially noticeable towards the end, when the angry sea started lashing the dike, breaking through the defences and engulfing the land ... gigantic, intense, big blue LEDBeam 1000 ‘waves’ crashed across the space, destroying everything in their wake.

The other 34 LEDBeam 1000s were scattered around on the front and mid trusses.

Marc's goal was to keep everything, including the set, looking naturalistic, so he added 180 x narrow beam PAR 64s to the plot, spread asymmetrically around the trusses, which played an important role in recreating night and day, sunshine, cloudy weather and general meteorology.

The latest Robe fixtures and the old skool PARs cleverly complimented each other in a tasteful juxtaposition of tungsten, discharge and LED light. Conjuring up the moods, the shadowy darkness threading through the sea and landscapes, light was ultimately essential in unfolding the story.

Lighting consumed 14 universes of DMX and was run on a Hog 4 programmed by Pepijn van der Sanden working alongside Marc. The operator for the run of shows was Idwinge Boetes. A Road Hog console was used for running the video media server.

All lighting equipment was supplied by Flashlight from Utrecht.

A reasonably long production period on site allowed the horses to acclimatise to the conditions. Friesians are known for their jet-black colouring, impressive bone structures long arched necks, grace and agility, and they had to undergo protracted training with the arena lighting in various different states to get them used to the intensities, colour changes and effects like gobos. Once they were comfortable with these, the dike and other scenery was introduced to the stage.

When building scenes, Marc had to be careful to avoid too many effects, hard-edged pools of light or shapes appearing on the floor, and the star animals also had to get used to being spot lit and followed.

Many of the riders were local and although expert horsemen and women, in turn needed a crash course in show and entertainment working and operating conditions – so it was a big learning curve for all involved.

“The many dynamics and unknowns made it all very exciting” enthused Marc, “and having our tight creative team was key to getting the results everyone wanted in the designated time scale. It is a show of which we are all proud. It was hugely interesting working with so many animals – the geese provided some extremely amusing moments – and the incredible results were the combination of many skills and disciplines plus some excellent teamwork”.

The original 12 ‘De Stormruiter’ shows that were advertised sold out in three days, so another 12 were added and enjoyed by capacity audiences of 5,500 throughout the run.

Photo Credit: Louise Stickland









