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Robe T1 Luminaires for Johannesburg's Market Theatre

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Johannesburg's multi award winning Market Theatre has been on South Africa's political, cultural, and social frontline since 1976 when it opened as an independent, anti-racist producing house at the height of the apartheid era. Championing a diverse collage of edgy, raw, authentically African work and creativity, it's helped to give a voice, ask leading questions, and build solidarity for those who have been silenced and ignored.

Located right downtown in the lively Newtown area of South Africa's bustling commercial epicentre, it continues to offer innovative new works, a forum for free-thinking and stands out as one of the most significant and critically acclaimed drama and live performance venues in the southern hemisphere.

This year, the Market Theatre took delivery of 50 x Robe T1 series LED moving lights as part of an upgrade initiative emanating from SA's Department of Arts & Culture which is looking to the future and boosting suitability across the arts.

These new Robe luminaires will be used across the venue's three main performance spaces – the John Kani, Barney Simon, and Mannie Manim.

The T1s were a major part of a package delivered by Robe's Southern Africa distributor DWR after winning a competitive tender to supply the venue's new theatrical / stage lighting elements.

The tender was written and specified by renowned SA lighting designer Denis Hutchinson, brought onboard as project consultant by the Market Theatre's then head of lighting and now head of stage services, Nomvula Molepo.

Denis has been associated with the theatre since it opened, and for him the task was very personal as well as a great honour. He spent substantial time assessing the precise needs of Nomvula and her lighting team working at the Newtown complex, also considering all the practicalities of staging and lighting shows there now and in the future.

This led to two mission-critical criteria for the moving light specification – low noise and excellent colour rendering.

The noise requirements for a theatre space like the Market with no amplified sound and producing dramas and spoken word shows where you can hear the proverbial pin drop every time, immediately excluded a substantial number of fixtures.

The high colour rendering and quality of light – especially with a programme of intense realistic drama performances – was also crucial, and these two parameters combined immediately narrowed down the field to a fairly small group of contenders.

The specifications and tender went out to the interested parties and after the responses and bids for the contract came in, a shootout was arranged in the John Kani Theatre.

All the moving light ‘hopefuls’ were present in the room simultaneously ... and all the various presenters watched each other’s demos. “This was the only way to get a true side-by-side comparison,” qualified Denis. This scenario also enabled the various sales teams to present their brands and pitches in depth to the amassed Market Theatre staff.

Denis and the Market Theatre technical team were then left alone to further examine all the auditioning luminaires for themselves. Between them, they independently rated each different fixture across multiple categories, all tying in with the government’s tender procedure, which narrowed it down to six or seven fixtures.

These results were then presented to the relevant evaluation committee, together with recommendations on the best choices to meet the theatre’s requirements.

“My responsibility in writing the tender was to get exactly the right products for the Market Theatre,” remarked Denis on the lengthy and meticulous process, and this resulted in the choice inter alia of the 50 x T1s (26 x T1 Profiles and 24 x T1 Washes).

Denis adds that the T1s are plenty bright enough for the space and thinks that Robe is at the forefront of developing areas like colour rendering and dimming on LED fixtures which have clearly been designed and fine-tuned for theatre applications.

Forty-four of these T1s will be residing in the John Kani ... where you can stand onstage with all 44 active at once and not hear a decibel of fan noise! The Mannie Manim has two T1s and the Barney Simon will have four luminaires to help light its shows.

Four Robe Spiiders were also part of this order from DWR, which join the Market's existing Spiiders in the John Kani, where all the crew love using them, especially on music shows.

DWR additionally supplied a quantity of smaller moving lights, generic LED luminaires, new follow spots and MA control as part of this project, which was overseen from their end by Kevin Stannett. Kevin and DWR have worked on several previous projects with Denis and enjoy a great working relationship with the Market Theatre.

The installation, including cabling and all the other associated and necessary infrastructure upgrades, was completed by The Install Crew, headed by Jakes Mogale, a separate specialist company which is part of the DWR Group and dedicated to delivering exceptional installations. Between them, Kevin and Jakes ensured that everything ran smooth, streamlined, hassle-free and as close to a 'textbook' installation as was possible.

"They did an incredible job," declared Denis. "It was a fantastic experience for everyone involved working with DWR and The Install Crew who really understood the brief. We all engaged in constant fluid and productive communication, and they always found a solution for any issues arising."

DWR's Duncan Riley - whose late father Dan supervised the original Market theatre lighting installation in 1976 - was "hugely proud" to be involved in this project. Not just because of the history and significance of the Market Theatre in SA but because it "put food on the table for a lot of people during a very tough time," he said, reminding everyone how the entertainment industry in South Africa has been especially badly hit by the pandemic.

The new lighting rig is also hugely exciting for all involved, especially during this time, generating plenty of positive energy around the huge potential the theatre now has for lighting shows in ways that were simply not possible before.

Currently, some limited audience performances are taking place, and the facilities are being utilised for livestreams and other film, broadcast, and image capture scenarios plus digital and virtual events.

The Market Theatre Foundation also runs the Ramolao Makhene teaching theatre and the Market Theatre Laboratory, both located across the road in Newtown, plus the Windybrow

Arts Centre which is based in a spectacular restored heritage building in Johannesburg's famous Hillbrow district.

Photo Credit: Duncan Riley



