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9.1.2024

Soweto Theatre Invests in Robe ESPRITES

Products Involved

ESPRITE®

The colourful, funky, eye-catching architecture of the Soweto Theatre stands at the centre of Jabulani, an area fast developing into a bustling future CBD. For the last 10 years, the venue, designed by Afritects, has provided a buzzing performing arts hub and forum for creative expression reaching into the heart of the local community.

In 2023, the lighting department, headed by Nkululeko Mazibuko, received 12 new Robe ESPRITE moving lights as part of a technical upgrade which was co-ordinated by the venue's technical manager, Lebugang Andrew Mnisi.

The lights were delivered by Robe's South African distributor, DWR, and join the original Robe LEDWash 300 and 600E Spot moving lights that have been working hard in the theatre since it opened in 2012, together with the LEDBeam 150s that were purchased in 2019.

The ESPRITES, which will be deployed in the Soweto Theatre's largest closed performance space, the Gibson Kente Theatre, are "a big leap forward," says Nkululeko.

The Theatre hosts a diversity of theatrical and drama performances and is also regularly used for concerts, music-based TV programmes, gospel shows, musicals, DVD shoots and festival events so ESPRITES were chosen for their multipurpose nature.

They are also bright enough to be rigged on the outside amphitheatre stage. Now at the back part of the Theatre, this was Soweto's original performance space and can accommodate up to 10,000 people in its current format, complete with sweeping views of the hills and south part of the city.

ESPRITE fitted all their criteria for a bright profile LED fixture that was versatile, with good gobos, robust, well-engineered and with good longevity. The LED light source was important to save power – which is a constant challenge in South Africa with daily load shedding.

The ESPRITE's TE – TRANSFERABLE ENGINE – technology was another key point for both Nkululeko and Lebugang for whom the concept and possibility of replacing or being able to swap out the LED

engine makes perfect sense. Lebugang also mentions that being able to use them as a follow spot if needed was another bonus.

Nkululeko could hardly contain his excitement as the new fixtures were delivered!

He lights many of the shows there and loves the fact that the ESPRITES will “allow us to broaden our imaginations with all their features so we can really push the boundaries of what is possible to evoke with lights and lighting.”

He thinks that Robe’s product development is generally “innovative” when it comes to creating tools to allow people like him to “create magic onstage”, and that having them on the rig will enhance the whole theatre and performance experience for those onstage and in the audience, a craft he describes as a “fine balance” of environmental authenticity, illusion, and emotion.

The theatre’s programme also includes many community productions, and everyone there enjoys giving these a professional presentation. “These new fixtures will help us make people’s work look great, and that’s what we enjoy making happen,” he added.

Soweto Theatre’s general manager, Vincent Motau, commented, “Soweto Theatre is constantly improving its technology to broaden the horizons of an artist's creativity while also limiting the problems that they might encounter. As a result, our theatre practitioners now have more time to contemplate and expand their creativity.

“Robe, the recognised leader in moving light technology, has made another major leap in innovation, and the ESPRITE Profile LED automated luminaire has a fast-change, low-cost, transferable light engine ingeniously solving the problem of performance longevity for those preferring the higher brightness of white source LEDs as an obvious replacement for old and ageing stock of discharge workhorses.”

DWR’s Kevin Stannett, who looks after the Soweto Theatre account, highlights that getting a luminaire like ESPRITE in house also makes sense from a cross rental perspective. “If they need to increase the quantity for a specific show, the stock can be augmented as there are already plenty of ESPRITES in circulation.”

Both Nkululeko and Lebugang understand the importance of good tech support and having a great relationship with the supplier, in this case DWR, something that has been built up over the last decade.

“Our schedule is constantly busy with shows going in and out every week, so we have to keep going, and if anything needs swapping in and out or fixing, then that has to be now!” noted Lebugang, to

which Nkululeko added that “consistency and reliability” is a given with DWR.

Lighting control is grandMA.

Both Lebugang and Nkululeko have worked at Johannesburg’s famous Market Theatre – groundbreaking in welcoming “all races” onstage and in the audience during the apartheid era of racial segregation – during the early parts of their careers.

The Market is known as a hotbed of independent thought and imaginative expression and has touched the lives of so many of South Africa’s truly great actors, creatives, technicians, producers, directors, and theatre professionals over the last 50 years. It also now has an extensive rig of Robe T1 Profiles and Washes.

Lebugang has also toured internationally with several shows and started at the Soweto Theatre when it opened in 2012, initially as a sound engineer. In 2014, he became technical manager.

Nkululeko studied business at the University of Johannesburg, became involved in the drama group there as an actor but found he enjoyed backstage activities and technology more than treading the boards! There was no-one doing light or sound at the time, and the system was prehistoric, but he made it work and became fascinated with the power and energy of lighting.

After graduating, he applied for an internship at the Market Theatre, learned a massive amount about lighting and design and made some important contacts, working as a freelance LD for a while before joining the team at Soweto Theatre in 2012.

Everyone at the Soweto Theatre is dedicated and passionate about their work, community and how music and theatre can have a positive effect, engaging and uniting people, ideas, and societies.

Photo Credit: Louise Stickland

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