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The Empire Strips Back in America

Hugely successful Australian burlesque Star Wars parody “The Empire Strips Back” has just completed its most extensive North American tour to date, also visiting Canada for the first time, complete with a suitably boisterous lightshow designed by Peter Rubie, featuring 30 x Robe Spiider LED wash beams as the core moving light fixtures.

The show has stormed its way into intergalactic reviews and delighted audiences since it launched at the Vanguard Theatre in Sydney in 2011. A colourful, highly visual action-packed performance offering up an array of elaborate body costumes including alien creatures, a fully robotic remote controlled R2-D2 and a life-size Jabba the Hutt operated by four puppeteers.

Peter has been involved with the show for the last four years, taking over from original lighting designer Ross Graham. Since then, it has evolved into the performance spectacle it is today including brand new acts and songs, and in 2018, a complete refresh of the lighting rig!

It was at this stage that Peter decided to replace the previous LED wash lights with Robe’s latest generation Spiider – a fixture known for its power, smooth colour mixing and fantastic range of hues.

Peter wanted Spiiders in the rig to help add some of the theatrical detail needed – in addition to all the big beamy rock ‘n’ roll style colour and movement cues. They are positioned on a 5 high by 6 wide staggered grid above the stage which also has a wall effect from the front, a powerful look that Ross created when the show first started touring.

“The Spiider has a beautiful quality of light at the right brightness” he commented, adding that while they can do all the rich bold saturates that are fundamental to the primary style and vibe of the show, they can also produce all the pastel shades and subtleties needed.

Upgrading from the previous single-angle LED wash light to the Spiiders also opened up a range of other possibilities whilst still being able to reproduce the original looks “minus the LED ‘smarties’” by turning off the outer ring of LEDs and zooming right down to a tight 4 degree beam.

This is great for the rock and pop numbers, with the advantage that the fixtures can also cover the entire stage for more scenic moments.

Flashy-trashy-fun moments abound explained Peter, including a mash-up dance-off between Han Solo and Chewbacca, a scene where the Spiiders excel themselves and he maximises the front lens pixel macros to create multiple fun looks.

Talking about the Spiider’s flower effect, Peter feels it’s essentially like having another light in the rig.

He’s built a custom profile for the Spiider in his grandMA2 console which enables him to treat the flower as if it is an individual fixture. “At its simplest this is like someone had added a classic shimmer effect light inside the central chip, given it some steroids plus colour mixing and control for the rotational direction, speed and focus!”

When combined with other LEDs on the rig, this can be used for a gentle breakup coming from overhead whilst also bathing the scene in colour.

This looks especially good in haze. The point where that audience sees C-3PO for the first time and the flower effects flick on and glisten through the highly reflective gold suit worn by the dancer is met with audible 'OOOHs' from the crowd every night!

Those moments are always a joy for any lighting designer!

"The individual chips also have a good hard-edged focus" he elucidates, "you can use the centre chip in standard mode focused tight for a profile-style edge". He adds that on more than one occasion lighting professionals have sworn they saw moving spots in the rig, which really appeals to Peter who likes to try and be different and think out of the box when creating exactly the right ambience for the scene.

He likes the glossy finish to the Spiider lens: "It has a certain lustre to the eye, but not the massive glare you get from other wash lights of similar brightness. So, the disc of the LEDs is not constantly catching your eye from the truss or side stage, and your focus can properly stay on the actors and the action".

When the new rig was initiated, he added some moving LED bars which formed a continuation of the Spiiders over the stage.

The biggest challenge with lighting the show was covering the diversity and dynamics of the performance and getting the sheer amount of looks required to light and the different characters and scenes in a rapidly moving show that goes "from the sublime to the ridiculous" in a high energy romp of singing, dancing and fun!

Princess Leia performs a delicate ballet style number to a Lana Del Rey number one minute and then launches into a no-holds-barred rock-out Christina Aguilera rock track.

Some acts have minimal settings and rely entirely on lighting to set the ambience and convey the mood, whilst others are crammed with set pieces and props.

In the US, the lighting equipment was supplied by Felix Lighting. "They have been a dream to deal with" states Peter, "from helping us choose the right supporting power systems and cabling in unfamiliar territories to running to our aid whenever we had a problem and having consistency and support on the tour across all of the states has been very comforting".

In Australia, the lighting vendor was Chameleon, who pulled out all the stops to purchase the Spiiders in time for the most recent tour there ... which were delivered by Robe's distributor Jands.

The North America run concluded on Broadway in May.

Photo Credit: Peter Rubie













Theatre