PROFESSIONAL MATTERS

Johanna Town on art versus tools

Rinaldo
Estonian National Opera
Lighting by Johanna Town
Photo by Harri Rospu
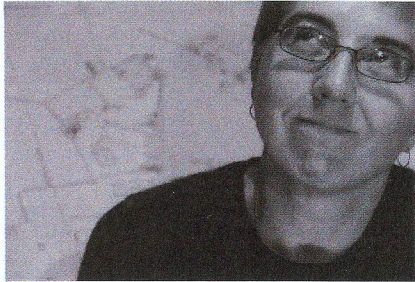
I am writing this article on a plane home to the UK – and, no, Marko's piece is on the following pages!

I have just spent three weeks lighting *Rinaldo* for Estonian National Opera in their beautiful capital city, Tallinn. It is a very simple but beautiful compact opera house that still practises a full repertoire system, which is very rarely done in Europe these days. Each day a new opera or ballet is performed and up to 20 different shows come into the theatre in any one month with never two months the same. Within this schedule they introduce five new shows a year and we were the first after the summer's break.

Unlike a seasonal repertoire where designs are agreed to fit into that season, we witnessed major daily changes to lighting and set that would not normally be contemplated in national opera houses today. It's a lot of hard work for a small team of stage and lighting technicians.

On my first day I met a compact lighting staff of two teams of five, one programmer and four on stage, working a daily two-shift system six days a week. It was also very nice to meet three female electrical staff as well as a brilliant female head of workshop and production assistant.

Being the first show of the autumn, everyone had just returned from their summer holidays. My chief, Anton, was going to be my main programmer as the new Grand MA had arrived just a few days before. They had also just invested in some new Clay Paky 700s to replace some

Rinaldo
Estonian National Opera
Lighting by Johanna Town
Photo by Harri Rospu

older Russian fixtures. It was great to be using all this new equipment, although we both spent quite a few late nights watching YouTube videos on how to programme the desk.

My three weeks were taken up with a lot of "information transfer" between Anton and me. I was asking him to achieve effects and types of cue changes that we have come to expect from any of these great lighting desks but which he had never programmed before so we had to clarify desk management systems and programming protocols.

Initially I wanted him to programme the show how he felt fit; after all, it was going to be in his repertoire for many years, but it soon became clear that this was not going to work, and with my limited knowledge I would need to be clearer on how the show was to be programmed. It was hard work getting the desk in order and we worked right up to an hour before the premiere.

Ergo, how much should a lighting designer know about the tools they are working with? Have we been spoilt with good programmers and technicians who fully understand the tools they have? Anton will soon be equally adept with these skills, but whose responsibility is it?

Is it ours? As lighting designers, should we have a full understanding of every lighting desk we are going to be presented with or should we expect the programmer or chief electrician to be able to interpret our design ideas?

In my case I felt management should have given the staff greater training opportunities with the new desk and more time for programming. As this wasn't implemented, I went away every afternoon and watched more videos, read training manuals and spent any free time available working alongside Anton to make sure the show and my design was not compromised. This is what we do in theatre, but is it right? Your thoughts, please. #

October/November 2014