



Underdrome in the Round

LD Katharine Williams
 has combined music
 lighting with theatre,
 dance and art to produce
 a stimulating and
 sensuous lighting design
 for Camden's
 Roundhouse
 Sarah Rushton-Read
 reports . . .



LD Katharine Williams.

UK - 'Dance, music and video art collide in a thrilling 360 degree assault on the senses' is how Camden Roundhouse describes the recently devised piece of choreography by its artist-in-residence, Darren Johnston.

Responsible for the dynamic and complex lighting design was the inexhaustibly enthusiastic and creative LD Katharine Williams. Not yet 30, she's risen through the lighting design hierarchy at breakneck speed, yet she modestly admits, "Underdrome was probably one of my biggest challenges to date."

Working collaboratively with Johnston - choreographer, performer and sound/video artist - and visual artist Michael England, Williams created a stimulating and sensuous lighting design that she says stretched her knowledge, confidence and experience to their limits.

She says: "Underdrome was created specifically for the Roundhouse in response to its architecture and heritage. Featuring 30 dancers and a 40-strong choir, the production comprised an integrated soundtrack mixed live by Zan Lyons, and set design by Block 9's Gideon Berger and Stephen Gallagher. What made the show unusual for me was its sheer size. Being involved in a devised show on this scale's a gamble, yet conversely, hugely exciting. Our vision was to create a look that combined music lighting with theatre and dance. This, melded with Michael's eerie visuals, created the otherworldliness that was the Underdrome."

The Roundhouse's distinctive cylindrical shape, supported by 24 pillars, provided the canvas. A central stage, from which a giant bonsai tree rose, surrounded by a huge flock of origami birds, fed out to four promontories ending in smaller satellite stages.

This made the show a fully immersive experience, with events happening in front, behind, around and above the audience. Working in the round invariably means a lot of kit, says Williams: "Where I would ordinarily only need one or two lights I needed four. This presented my first major challenge, as the budget didn't reflect this. Essentially a receiving house, the Roundhouse has limited stock, primarily VL6s - a glorious bit of lighting history, but they can't move focus in and out or offer the kind of cuts I wanted - there's not even a blue on the colour wheel! Luckily PRG's John Cadbury came to the rescue, supporting us with extremely competitively priced kit."

A key element of Katharine's creative palette were Clay Paky Alpha Profiles: "The sharp, accurate shuttering was brilliant for isolating dancers on the podiums or doing shutter wipes up and down the promontories. The moment you chase to the music with such effects you get a very exciting look. They definitely opened up the creative doors for me."

Richard Martin Lighting supplied Clay Paky Alpha Beam 300s - PRG's were all out on hire. "In a big-budget world we would've had 24, to continue an idea Darren and I played with during our last collaboration - using beams of light to attack performers. However, the four units we had were impressive, excellent for thunderbolts on the top of the tree. We manually operated them for spot cues. Dancers would choreographically attack each other across the podium stages with each dancer's 'punch' visually delivered by an Alpha Beam, which would shoot across the space to hit the opposing dancer. I love live elements like this - as we progressed, the percussionist started to respond to the light and choreography, joining in with her own bangs and crashes."

Equipment List

Control

1 x grandMA desk (running backup on the MA on PC software on Rowan Pashley's Mac, with an MA node outputting DMX)

Intelligent Fixtures

8 x Clay Paky Alpha Profile 1200W
4 x Clay Paky Alpha Beam 300W
12 x Martin MAC 2000 Profile 1200W
18 x SGM Palco3 LED Wash 150W
16 x Vari*Lite VL6 Spot 400W
16 x Vari*Lite VL5 Wash 100W

Conventionals

21 x ETC Source Four Zoom (15-30°) 750W
12 x ETC Source Four Zoom (25-50°) 750W
52 x PAR 64 MFL CP62 1000W
20 x Rainbow Scrollers (on PAR 64)

Strobes

4 x Martin Atomic Strobe 3000W
4 x Atomic Scrollers

Atmospherics

2 x Martin Glaciator Extreme
1 x Look Solutions Unique Hazer
1 x Cirro cracked oil machine

Limited time and budget made realising the show concept by opening night testing: Williams discusses "The process was made all the better by programmer Rowan Pashley, who is deeply talented. This was borne out when we realised the console we had could not sufficiently realise the creative vision. So, three days before we opened we switched to a GrandMA, which Stage Electrics found and transported to London with four seconds notice! Rowan had never used one of these in anger, so he spent a couple of days over at MA Lighting UK transferring the show and learning the console, generously assisted by Richard Lambert. Once back on site, MA gave us unwavering technical support in the form of Simon Barrett, so a big thank-you to both and to Philip Norfolk for organising it!"

Pashley comments: "The GrandMA console just made sense to me. Sure, it's a complicated piece of equipment, but the operating system and the different ways you can choose to run it are really satisfying. I was lucky to have such good training and support from GrandMA - I hadn't expected them to be as involved in our show as they were, I'm really grateful!"

He adds: "We had numerous MIDI triggers onto different playbacks to fit the cues exactly to timecode. The show was complex, although there were less than the 1000 lighting cues I'd originally expected. We started programming from the moment we got in on the Monday to when we opened on Friday evening. If we could've programmed overnight, every night, it still wouldn't have been enough! In the end, due to budget, we did one overnighter, but we used every second of every day, otherwise."

Working with projection designer Michael England was not without its challenges either. Williams elaborates: "We got off to a weird start when he arrived and suggested that there were more lights than in a Bon Jovi gig! Obviously we're used to working in different ways - I'm used to long technical rehearsals where each designer gives cues to a DSM (or in this case, inserts all the MIDI ones into the timecode) whereas Michael is used to being called live during performance by a show director. Of course, in the end it was fine! We fixed a lot of the AV content with Darren, so it was right for each scene or moment. Michael's image designs were so beautiful and video so atmospheric that it made tying lighting and video together all the more gratifying. The BP screens allowed the projections to come through to light performers and in the end we co-developed some fantastic flavours for each performance element, which resulted in a richly stimulating and visually dynamic experience."



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View Katharine Williams' lighting plot for Underdrome online at www.lstonline.co.uk/Jul09

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