

11 / 16 / 2018

Demon Robes for Sweeney Todd at Vanemuine

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Recreating the dark and gruesome world of Sweeney Todd, the fictional Demon Barber of Fleet Street according urban legend ... at the Vanemuine Theatre in Tartu, Estonia, was a tricky task requiring the juxtaposition of a classic Victorian east London docklands ambiance as the historical industrial backdrop, shot through with lighting and effects to recreate multiple locations.

It laid down a few challenges for lighting designer Margus Vaigur ... who had the house Robe luminaires at his disposal including 20 x MMX Spots, 52 x LEDWash 1200s, 16 x LEDWash 600s and 12 x CityScape Xtreme's together with 12 new Robe DL7S Profiles which are a recent addition to the venue's Big Theatre house lighting inventory.

Margus lit the entire production with the Robe moving lights together with some other LEDs, around 200 in total, using no conventionals at all.

The production - the first time the musical has been staged in Estonia - was directed by rising star director and actor Janel Jonas. The imposingly stark industrial set was created by Iir Hermelin, and both took a keen interest in how the space was lit and how the atmospherics played a vital role in the unfolding the ultimate story of a man who became bigger than his own destiny!

This was also the first time Sweeney Todd had been sung in Estonian - Vanemuine has a healthy reputation for breaking through cultural and traditional barriers - and with a large cast of around 40 onstage during the busy scenes, this all presented more challenges to Margus who had to craft exactly the right ambience for each scene.

Iir commented that Margus "thinks dramaturgically" when it comes to applying light to a scene ... treating it like another actor. As an architect of space, he likes the way the LD plays with beam angles and warm and cold colour temperatures, "He really does craft lights just like a sculptor".

Whilst strongly defined - including several ship / seafaring artefacts - the set was also elusively abstract. It was like a universal space, but also literal enough to represent specific locations, so there was a lot of emphasis on lighting different sections of it to complete the pictures and make visual suggestions to the audience.

It was the first time that Janel had worked with Margus, an experience he was really enjoying when I caught up with them during rehearsals, however Margus and Iir have collaborated before on a couple of operas as well as some TV work.

At the start of the design process, all three creatives had several brain-storming sessions where they discussed and blocked the basics, then all worked separately, developing their own areas with the occasional cross referencing to check ... that they were all on the same page.

Margus used the LEDWashes extensively, both for various general lighting and for effects, with some on the overhead rig and some on the floor and on side booms ... there was a lot of low level shadowy lighting throughout to emphasize the sinister undercurrents of the drama. The lower level lights were also used to shoot up through the shredded metal floors of the upper set, and Margus made much use of the LEDWash 1200s and 600s' excellent daylight white ranges of 4000k upwards.

He found the DL7S Profiles extremely helpful all round and loved the subtle and sophisticated colour mixing. They were the primary profiles supported by the MMX Spots, although Margus comments that overall, they could have done with more profiles generally in the show!

Positioned on the high bars, the DL7S;s shutters were used to isolate areas of the stage and set, tightly picking out specific elements and highlighting certain actions ... building drama with their sharp focuses and precise edges.

The challenge was to maintain the suspense and creeping sense of evil that permeates the entire performance, so there was an abundance of back lighting, and naturally it was also important not to lose the actors among it, through all of the action and effects!

Come press night, the reviews were good and the production enjoyed plenty of critical acclaim and lots of packed audiences. Vanemuine is one of the best-known producing houses in Estonia, with a reputation for world class international productions.

The venue first invested in Robe moving lights in 2013 as part of an upgrade to all Estonia's state run theatres, which has made a huge difference to the scope and quality of the shows staged there.

Margus himself is based at The Endla Theatre in Parnu ... where he lights their own productions and co-ordinates the lighting department. They also have Robe moving lights in the house, so he is very familiar with the brand, and uses the fixtures daily in his work. He thinks Robe is an excellent brand, especially with the breadth of the ranges, which means "you can really choose and use the appropriate light for the job".

In addition to his work at Endla and various freelance lighting design projects, he is also a regular lecturer at the country's only Technical Theatre College in Viljandi.

Photo Credit: Maris Savik





