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NRG @ TPI 2018

The NRG crew prove that the next generation is well and truly a force to be reckoned with.

When it comes to this industry – determination to succeed, and to deliver the best production possible, in the shortest of timeframes is a fairly important attribute to possess. And a group of six students, from various colleges around the UK have certainly shown this resolve in heaps over the past couple of weeks. Especially when the production in question is the TPI Awards 2018 – to an audience of, well, pretty much every single person in the industry who they might like to impress.

Meet the “NRG@TPI” crew – students still very much in the midst of their educational careers who were considered suitable nominees by their tutors for being up to the challenge of working on the production and lighting design for the TPI Awards.

Students who, through their own merit and enthusiasm underwent an interview process with the “no nonsense, take no prisoners, this is a tough gig” Nathan Wan – Robe’s in-house Media & Lighting Designer and you have what can only be described as the dream team for this year’s TPI Award ceremony.

The calibre of this year’s students was in fact so good, that Nathan was in no doubt that he had to create some new roles to accommodate as many of them as possible, to support him, and his right-hand man Andy Webb.

“As the interviews progressed on one intense day at the end of January in London, I said to Nicky Rowland – manager of NRG for Robe – that we had to create more roles than originally existed. I knew we couldn’t let these guys go!” explains Nathan.

And so the 2018 “NRG@TPI” crew was crafted from students from four colleges who are engaged with Robe UK’s NRG (Next Robe Generation) initiative, a framework providing opportunities for the next generation of lighting designers, technicians and operators to meet and socialise in informal settings with current industry professionals and lighting practitioners.

“The TPI Awards is without doubt the highest profile technical opportunity we offer the students as part of the NRG initiative” confirms Nicky.

“It’s an event which sees the entire production and touring ‘who’s who’ in one room – and so for Robe it’s a massively important gig. We are really putting our faith in the next generation by offering them some pretty fundamental roles in the production. I told them before the event “anyone who’s anyone is here, so make it look good” and they totally took that on board,” continues Nathan.

The 2018 NRG@TPI team was headed up by Jordan Tinniswood, a 2nd year student at Rose Bruford, who was picked by Nathan to join him as Assistant LD for the main production. Adam Davies, a long-standing participant of the NRG initiative and a final year student at University South Wales (USW), was

offered the role of LD for the Robe VIP Lounge; Alex Merrett in his second year at USW took on the role of LD for the main bar area; Owen Yelland, 2nd year Rose Bruford impressed Wan so much with his systems knowledge a new role was created for him as Systems Tech across the entire production; James Matthews from LIPA was Assistant LD for the VIP Bar and RoboSpot operator, whilst James Marshall from LAMDA completed the team as a member of the Hawthorn crew and RoboSpot operator.

So why did they take up this highly pressurised but high-profile opportunity?

For Jordan Tinniswood it was a no-brainer. "The opportunity to work alongside Nathan on TPI meant it was incredibly easy to decide to apply for it. The work Nathan creates alongside Andy Webb for Robe has captured my imagination for a long time and getting the opportunity to see how he designs his work first hand and to be able to help him out in some way was something I couldn't turn down! Throughout the pre-vis and show prep, and onsite I picked up an awful lot of practical tips from him on programming an Avolites console, tips and tricks that I have in fact already put into practice on another show. This is the first time I have worked in a corporate environment so having that corporate mindset both practically and creatively is another tool I now have at my disposal. It's been a massive confidence boost and what I have learnt from Nathan and Andy on getting the most out of your designs and thinking outside of the box is something I know I can build on."

Adam Davies is well versed in working as part of NRG for Robe - he worked as crew on last year's TPI Awards and has, for the past two years, been part of the student crew for Robe at the PLASA Show in London. "It's not every day that opportunities arise to have such a prominent role at an event this big so early on in one's career. Having been a part of TPI on the crew last year, I was fully expecting to not receive a role this year in order to allow other students the chance to get involved. To then have Nathan request I join the crew again, and for him to create a new role of LD for the VIP Lounge was beyond my expectations."

For Alex Merrett this was his second opportunity to work alongside the Robe team, having previously worked on the Robe stand at PLASA 2017. When asked why he took up this opportunity he is very clear. "If Nathan was putting his trust in me as LD and Operator for the main bar, this was going to be a great way to gain some very valuable experience working on a large-scale production with some great people. I was given a great opportunity to create something creative and original that showcased my skills using Robe products. It also enabled me to learn new things and new ways of doing things, whilst using my pre-existing skills."

Both James Marshall (LAMDA) and James Matthews (LIPA) are relative newcomers to the NRG initiative. James (Marshall) agrees with the overall sentiments expressed by the rest of the team. "I believed it would be a brilliant opportunity to work with industry professionals, gain extra experience and work alongside the Robe and Hawthorn teams". Adds James (Matthews) "I knew instantly that I had to take it up. With Robe being such a tremendous force in the industry it was hard to say anything but yes, and I was picked! Wow!!"

Bar none, all the team have commented that they've used the opportunity to hone their developing skills as lighting designers, techs and operators - something which is core to the purpose of the NRG

initiative.

For Jordan the experience was second to none, as he reflects: "It was amazing hearing that people enjoyed the ceremony and timecode show. To have that acknowledgement that something I invested a lot of time and effort in, was appreciated by some of the most well-respected members of our industry makes me incredibly proud."

Adam agrees, commenting "it's been a masterclass in how to remain adaptable. On events of this size, things always change last minute and being flexible and willing to adapt to changes, whatever the complexity, is a great skill to have."

Alex knows that he will "take a lot away with me from this experience to further my career, from the start of the planning right through to the end of the get out. And to make the presentation of design plans as clear and easily understandable for all the crew as possible."

James (Marshall) states "it's been a highlight of my career so far to work alongside the Robe and Hawthorn teams to get a major sized rig completed, in the air and working in such a limited time frame. Following a very mobile and pacey Russel Kane around the stage using the new RoboSpot Follow Spot system was a big responsibility. Throughout this entire process I've learnt what it's like working alongside professionals on such a big industry event, and working with new equipment - all of which is pretty invaluable at this stage in my career."

Owen agrees, saying "when my tutor mentioned the opportunity, I knew instantly that the chance to work on the TPI Awards was going to be great opportunity to build up my experience and would be a massive learning curve and challenge - which I like. It was a massive responsibility to be given the role of Systems Tech by Nathan. It was a huge challenge to get everything talking together from the arena consoles to the art-net nodes in the roof space and Kling-Net communicating with all 60 Spiiders that made up the clumps of Spiiders down the venue. I've gained invaluable understanding and knowledge of networks for larger scale events and my highlight has to be when the main show began with the opening light show and the system worked. Phew!"

Some of the students have been involved with the NRG initiative for a while and are very clear about why NRG is important to their studies, and ultimately their careers.

Says Jordan "my course allows us to review a range of lighting disciplines from live music to TV to architectural. Having the chance to go and talk, in a relaxed environment at the monthly NRG networking socials hosted by Ashley Lewis, with industry professionals and literally pick their brains is something that is incomparable with anything else. Advice from people who have been there and done it is something that is so gratefully received by everyone who is a part of the NRG. Knowing that there is the support of many people in the industry for up and coming designers and technicians is something that stops me from considering a different career path, and knowing there are companies as well as individuals out there to help you find your feet and assist in whatever way they can reminds me of what can be achieved with hard work and dedication. As students I know we owe everyone involved with the NRG initiative a great deal of thanks for all of the time and effort they put into supporting our future careers."

Alex agrees that "without a doubt, NRG offers a lot of opportunities to get involved within the industry and to meet and network with multiple industry professionals. It gives students an insight for what is to come. It creates goals to achieve. Talking to industry professionals can help massively achieve our aims."

"I think the NRG is amazing," reflects Adam. "There is a lot of stigma within this industry that young people, students in particular, don't really know what they're doing, can't be trusted or don't have enough experience to work on events. However what Robe and the NRG is doing, unlike anyone else, is proving all of these assumptions to be false. By showcasing the talents of students at events such as the TPI Awards, or introducing them to industry professionals at socials and on behind-the-scenes tours throughout the year, it's giving our generation an opportunity like no other to meet, and interact first-hand with the people whose work inspired us to get into the industry in the first place. NRG is a great scheme devised by Ashley Lewis and to any student who's not yet a member or who isn't seizing these great opportunities I have to ask "Why Not?"

Others are relative newcomers to the initiative but know they will continue to engage with NRG from hereon. Says James (Matthews) "NRG is, in my eyes an industry leader. The time, commitment and resources put behind us by Robe through NRG is second to none. Because we are, as NRG says, the next generation and the more opportunities like this the better our knowledge will be in future years and the stronger the industry will be because of it. Standing at FoH and realising I had been part of the delivery team to a room full of people who I aspire to be like was an immense honour. This was my first involvement in NRG and I am so glad it exists, as it's a fantastic help for me to achieve my goals." Owen agrees, adding "It's a great thing that Robe is doing with NRG as it is allowing students to engage with industry professionals and gain vital experiences to help kick start their careers. The framework offered by NRG is a great way to learn the tricks of the trade and also I find it great listening to other people and their stories and experiences - what better way to learn and gain valuable advice?!"

And it is also firm friendships which are being forged. Jordan: "On a personal note, I have met many people through the NRG who I would now refer to as close friends. People who I'd likely have never met otherwise and who I may well work with in the future once we all graduate. Adam: "Prior to TPI I'd met Jordan once or twice and I'd now say I'm good friends with him but I'd never met Owen, James and James. Being able to make new friends of a similar age in the industry and expand your network is great and I've no doubt I'll be seeing them again soon - most likely at the next NRG event."

And so as the sun rose at around 6.30am on the morning after the night before, and the last truck rolled away on a freezing cold "BeastFromTheEast" morning, it wouldn't be unreasonable of the students to think 'never again'. But no ... having asked them what one word they would use to sum up their experience they said, without hesitation a selection of words that captured their honest enthusiasm for what they had experienced over a manic 48 hours. "Brilliant" "Amazing" "Awesome" "Life-Changing". Adam expands even more: "One word? Catapulting! In my career, ordinarily it'd take me years to get enough experience and reputation to have some involvement with this show, if at all. Thanks to the NRG, I've worked on it twice and I'm only 22!"

Nicky sums up the pride the Robe team feel about the NRG crew at the awards. "These guys are so focussed, they know exactly what they want from their careers and how to get it. It's impressive to see - they are wise beyond their years. There is no doubt they will succeed with the determination they are demonstrating, and the commitment to their craft. We are pretty proud of them to be honest and delighted to have them engaged in the NRG programme - all six of them embody what this initiative is all about. I think they are quite a band of brothers now!"

Summing up the success of the NRG initiative this year at the TPI Awards, Mick Hannaford, MD Robe, has only praise for the students who were involved. "The "NRG@TPI" crew exceeded our expectations - they worked harder and longer hours than we would could have anticipated but they just wanted to make sure it was all right, and to match Nathan's exacting requirements. I honestly got the sense throughout the process that they didn't want to let Robe down, or their college/university, or their fellow crew members. The camaraderie amongst them was really encouraging to see. They are on their way to being incredibly successful people in their chosen careers, and if Robe, and the NRG initiative can continue to support them with this - well, I can honestly say we will do all we can".

