

10 / 11 / 2023

Robe Lights up Sentech Tower for Brixton Light Festival

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The fabulous 2023 Brixton Light Festival in Johannesburg, South Africa, delivered its third – and largest to date – event filled with the magic, mystery and imagination evoked by light. It started during the covid lockdowns as a community-led and driven art-based lighting experience to unite the already tight-knit, lively and diverse neighbourhood of Brixton. The goal is to celebrate the spirit and importance of community, and the power of art and empathy.

Sound designer and Brixton resident Fried Wilsenach from Working Dog helped implement several lighting installations this year, including one illuminating the impressive Sentech Tower, an iconic landmark that dominates the Brixton skyline and that of the surrounding Auckland Park suburb. The Tower is part of SABC's (South African Broadcasting Corporation) broadcasting HQ which is also located there.

Fried in turn asked lighting designer Oliver Hauser – who works across a broad base of lighting sectors including television, live events and theatre, drama, comedy, opera, musicals, avant-garde dance contemporary music & conceptual performance which is where his career started – to join the team and provide ideas for the Tower illuminations. The two have been friends and colleagues for many years.

Oliver utilised Robe fixtures – 2 x Tarrantulas, 2 x ESPRITES, a FORTE and a MegaPointe – as he needed serious power to throw to the top of the 237-metre-high Tower. The lights were supplied to the event by DWR as part of their sponsorship package.

He needed the most powerful lights he could source to transform Sentech into a beacon of light that was visible from all over the city, and these Robe luminaires were “exactly what I needed,” he enthused.

The fixtures were positioned on top of a garage in Fried's garden approximately 240 metres away with a nice clean shot to the target, so the long throw of the FORTE, ESPRITE, Tarrantula and MegaPointe was perfect for the task.

The West side of the tower – the one facing the Brixton community – was lit up and became a signature symbol of the Light Festival.

Oliver used the two pairs of lights – Tarrantulas and ESPRITES – to highlight the Tower's reinforced concrete mast section and 'lollipop' – a cantilevered observation deck which has been closed to the public since 1982. The Tarrantulas were used for colouring the mast which, being concrete and pale grey, took the light very well. It was divided into two areas – top and bottom – each lit with one Tarantula.

The FORTE and the two ESPRITES then worked brilliantly as overlaid patterning and texturing on the mast – the two ESPRITES were also assigned to the top / bottom sections, while the FORTE – effectively the third layer of lighting – covered the whole 237 metres, such is its intensity!

Oliver was delighted with the results of combining the FORTE and ESPRITE animation wheels and rotating gobos in this context, noting how beautifully they illuminated the tower.

The MegaPointe was used for additional pin-spotting and colouring on the lollipop, and on the 'sock' as Oliver and his crew dubbed the antennae on the very top of the Tower.

They programmed around 24 lighting looks and cues in the grandMA Dot2 console, swapping between different combinations of the Robe fixtures, all of which thrilled the amassed crowds who could experience the Tower in a different, unique, and never-seen-before light for the occasion.

Other landmarks lit up as part of the Light Festival included Kingston Frost Park, one of Jozy's oldest green spaces and the Brixton Water Tower, and other famous structures.

All installations followed the 2023 festival theme, "Where the Waters meet the Light", a nod to Brixton's unique geographical location along the Witwatersrand watershed.

Depending on which side of this watershed line rainfall occurs, water journeys either toward the Indian Ocean or the Atlantic on the opposite side of the country, which provided a stimulating theme sparking the creativity of both community members and artists, fuelling inspiration for this action-packed event.

The 2023 project was supported by the City of Joburg Department of Transport, DWR Distribution and OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) and was made possible by the hard work of scores of volunteers.

The industry-supported SOS Charity Fund – founded by DWR's Duncan Riley during the pandemic to raise awareness of technical production and its contribution to the economy and social fabric of the nation – sponsored the wages of 12 crew who worked tirelessly to help make these major festival installations a reality.

As previously mentioned, DWR contributed the Robe lighting fixtures while Gearhouse Splitbeam, led by Managing Director Alistair Kilbee, were pivotal as the primary technical supplier, providing equipment at a significantly reduced cost.

Fried commented that the Festival is a special project that's very close to his heart.

"Through active citizenship and continued innovation, our community strives to create a safe and friendly neighbourhood, improving the quality of life for all who are a part of it. It's not always a straightforward process and we need to be mindful of our reality and its challenges.

"We are fortunate to have very talented and generous individuals amongst ourselves with a wide network of professional contributors who believe in the importance of an initiative such as the Light Festival."

He highlighted that seeing women and children walk and play on the streets of Brixton at 11pm on the 2nd of September was great for the morale of everyone calling the area home.

Fried also enjoyed the camaraderie of working with a great crew whose efforts reflected great results and generated a real sense of achievement and teamwork.

Oliver Hauser commented that "Brixton's passion for inclusiveness is contagious," which is one of the many reasons he was so keen to help! With the festival's cultural diversity embracing the values and contributions of all its residents, radiating a vibe of togetherness, "Everyone feels welcome here no matter who you are. This is what I love the most," he concluded after the highly successful 2023 event

About the Sentech Tower

The Sentech Tower was built in 1961 and has commanding views over the area. It is still the tallest such structure in Africa and was the first in the world to combine six FM channels simultaneously into a common antenna. It is now used for broadcasting television and radio stations across South Africa. The foundations of the 7,820-ton tower are just 2 metres deep and 6 metres wide and have an external diameter at the base of 25 metres.

More than 1,340t of concrete was used in the foundation, with a further 5,684 tons in the tower. Reinforcing consists of 300t of high-tensile and mild steel bars, and additional reinforcements ensure the tower can withstand wind gusts of up to 200 km/h.

Photo Credit: Heather Mason





