

Lighting for babies

Will Evans on his latest lighting challenge

I'm well versed in lighting shows for younger audiences. Children's theatre probably makes up about 50% of my work. Generally the age ranges are something from three to ten years and that tends to be my comfort zone. However, it's nice to push yourself outside of your comfort zone once in a while, so when I was approached by Theatre Hullabaloo in Darlington to light their first show for babies in their second space, I jumped at the chance, not fully knowing what I was letting myself in for!

The Gillian Dickson Creative Play Space, which is a gallery/performance space/ play area in the heart of this fantastic new theatre created specifically for children, was to be the venue for *Lullabub*, an immersive show designed for 0-30 months. Although that doesn't seem like a large age span, it is in the development of a baby, so the theatre decided to do two versions of the show, one for babies (0-12 months) and one for toddlers (13-30 months). Both shows would follow the same storyline

and feature similar characters but the baby show would be gentler and the performers would be sat amongst the babies and parents concentrating on the individual babies rather than an audience as a whole.

Lighting this type of show presented some unique challenges. First, the performance was to happen all around

the space with the audience sitting in the middle so there was no traditional stage or performance area to throw light at. Second, the blocking was to be fluid, with the performers responding to the babies and judging the moods and emotions of the little ones as the performance progressed, so I couldn't have specific areas lit for set moments. Third, everything had to be out of reach from little fingers: lanterns, cables, control equipment. I also had to consider the environment of the space in a practical sense. The space had no air conditioning, only ventilation, which was fine for day-to-day use but would not be able to disperse the heat of a tungsten rig.

After a few chats with the director and designer we decided that the performance should not be approached in the traditional way with scenes and cues but that each section of the performance would have a theme and a mood that stitched together to form a narrative. We also decided that the whole space would be lit and we'd work from the point of a "shared space" between the performers and audience at all times. The director, Anna Newel, and I agreed that no lights should be directly hitting the audience





would go from dusk to dawn through a dreamland of deep pinks, blues and purples, finishing in a sunrise that enveloped the space in rich oranges and yellows. I love colour and all it can do but in particular I love the transition of one colour to another and how the space morphs and changes as the colour shifts. This, coupled with the heat requirements of the space,

from any direction. Adults tend to always follow the action and accept a certain amount of being lit in immersive theatre; however, babies will crawl, roll, shuffle and look anywhere and everywhere and we didn't want them to roll over and suddenly be blinded by a light. After much looking at the model box and playing around with my Maglite I decided to only use reflected light, bounced off the white ceiling in the room (for once I was grateful to have a white room to light in!), and to light the cyc that designer Alison Hefferman had wrapped the room in, not from the top or bottom as would be traditional, but from the opposite side of the room so the reflected light bounced straight into the centre of the space.

The concept of *Lullabub* was "a magical dreamland of sleepy byes in a playful, peaceful and wonderful performance" so I looked into a lighting journey that

led me to an all-LED rig comprised of linear battens and ETC Colorsources pars. My only tungsten lamps were three Source Fours with gobos and animation wheels for a rippling wave effect during the underwater sequence.

There's no traditional control position in the space and the creative team really didn't want a control position in the corner with monitors and lights, etc. We ended up placing the Qlab system for sound and ETC Nomad system outside of the space, tucked under the cafe's counter (much to the annoyance of the cafe staff!), routing all of the cables through a high window to keep them out of reach. Our stage manager, dressed all in white to blend in to the room, then operated the lights and sound from two iPads over a secure Wi-Fi network. I was more than a little apprehensive about this but with some

simple adjustments, like making sure the iPads didn't go to sleep and locking the computers to their designated networks, the trick worked.

Worth also mentioning is the child-friendly nature of Theatre Hullabaloo. One of our actresses had come to Darlington with her ten-month old baby and partner for the duration of the rehearsal period. While her partner still had to travel back and forth most days for work, the little one was supposed to be in childcare. Unfortunately, this fell through at the last minute. It was suggested straight away by the director and producer that she bring the baby in with her to rehearsals; the actress didn't even have to ask. Most of the time the baby was actually used to test ideas in the rehearsal room, and when we were doing notes or other work where it wouldn't be safe to have a baby crawling around, the people in the office were only too happy to babysit (although I heard that not a lot of actual work was done in the office on those occasions!). I mention this as a follow-up to Lucy Carter's article in the last issue about having the director's baby in tech with them – and would that happen if it was anyone other than the director? I'm pleased to say the answer, in Darlington at least, appears to be yes! There is a shift in attitudes to having children and working in theatre; it's slow – glacial at times – but it is happening and moving in the right direction. 🍀