CITY THEATRICAL
NEW YORK • LONDON

An Interview with MARTIN CHISNALL

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE:

Name:	**Martin Chisnall**
Profession:	**Production Electrician**
Experience:	**30+ Years**
Location:	**London, England**
Website:	**www.mchisnall.co.uk**
Recent Shows:	***Girl from the North Country*** **(The Gielgud Theatre);** ***Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*** **(The Palace Theatre)**

Martin Chisnall is based in London, but works around the world. He specializes in production lighting on West End plays and large scale musicals, but has also toured shows nationally and internationally. He has extensive experience of industrial shows, events and exhibitions. Martin was recognized as the ABTT Technician of the Year 2019, and is a member of the Association of Lighting Designers.

THE INTERVIEW:

City Theatrical (CTI): Where were you born and where do you live now?

Martin Chisnall (MC): I was born in Bedford, a small 'market town' about 50 miles north of London. At the end of the commuter train line into the capital. I currently live in New Malden. Although technically in the county of Surrey, it can be considered a suburb of London. It's about 30 minutes commute into the West End, where a lot of my work is. If it had a claim to fame it might be its proximity to Wimbledon, where tennis comes from.

CTI: How did you get started in show business?

MC: Through being good at science at school. It was always the science teacher who 'did the lighting' for the school plays (it's all about electricity so it seemed the natural choice). Mr. Davidson (Chemistry) was always looking for willing volunteers to help. Whilst still at school I applied and was lucky enough to be accepted into the National Youth Theatre (NYT), a sort of summer school for young people interested In theatre, then based in London. Although the NYT does not exist to provide formal training in theatre, it's amazing how many members go on to have professional careers in theatre, both onstage and backstage.

CTI: Give our readers a brief recap of the last 20 years of your lighting career.

MC: National Youth Theatre introduced me to practicing lighting professionals. Dropped out of University (Electronic Engineering) because I was too busy doing theatre and not attending lectures. First proper job in theatre: Assistant Electrician at The Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. Then Chief Electrician at the Arts Theatre, a small West End Theatre, and then to The Theatre Royal Stratford East. A few years later I went freelance and have been working as a freelance production electrician ever since. Initially in events and corporate events as well as theatre, but now almost exclusively theatre.

CTI: Why electrics and not sound, carpentry, rigging, etc?

MC: Interesting question. I suppose it goes back to my interest in science

Rachel John (Mrs Neilsen) in *Girl from the North Country* at The Gielgud Theatre (Cylla Von Tiedemann) Lighting Design by Mark Henderson.

"I think once you have that practical gene inside you, you can jump crafts. And rigging as a theatre discipline as we know it now was only in its infancy when I started."

and technology which more naturally gravitates towards electrical stuff rather than carpentry. Although I can turn my hand to a bit of woodwork. I think once you have that practical gene inside you, you can jump crafts. And rigging as a theatre discipline as we know it now was only in its infancy when I started. If we wanted to rig something back then it generally involved dropping a hemp line in, manually hauling it out and tying it off to a cleat on the fly rail.

CTI: What is your lighting life like now? (What is your typical yearly schedule, how much travel, how many shows, etc.)

MC: I've been lucky enough to have had a 15 year association with the international tour *Mamma Mia!*, a show which has taken me to many parts of the world and has obviously necessitated a lot of travel over the years. The production is currently in the middle of a year long UK tour, and as lighting supervisor I travel around the UK and catch up with it when I can.

Increasingly my work is becoming 'West End' centric, and I average about a West End show a month. This January I am working on a production of *Uncle Vanya* at the Harold Pinter Theatre, and *Leopoldstadt*, a new Tom Stoppard play at The Wyndham's Theatre.

Martin Chisnall and lighting designer Neil Austin at PLASA London 2014

"I'm not sure technology has made my life easier, rather it's just enabled bigger and more elaborate shows to be produced. There is now so much advanced technology on even modest shows it is difficult to have an in-depth knowledge of everything."

CTI: What is your favorite type of project to work on?

MC: I find myself increasingly preferring larger shows where there is the time and the money to install the lighting rig properly and neatly, as opposed to touring where the onus is more on working quickly, but not always elegantly, to make that Tuesday night opening.

CTI: You have seen technology change over the course of your career. It is harder being a technician now than when you started, or has new technology made it easier?

MC: I have indeed seen technology change over the years!

I am just old enough to remember life before DMX. Colour scrollers came, and went, now largely replaced with CMY colour mixing moving lights and more recently RGB (add more letters of your choice here) LED light sources. Moving lights have become ubiquitous, not just in musical theatre, but straight plays as well.

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There is now so much advanced technology on even modest shows it is difficult to have an in-depth knowledge of everything. I suppose this has led to specialisms within the industry. Programmer, moving light tech, set electrics, systems, etc…

CTI: You were an early adopter of RDM. How have you used it on your shows?

MC: RDM has come a long way in a few short years. Let's be honest, it could be a bit flaky in the early days, and we often muttered 'it would be a lot quicker if I'd got the ladder out in the first place' in response to the strapline 'faster than a ladder'. (Yes Yes. I know it wasn't necessarily the fault of RDM per se.

Harry Potter and the Cursed Child at The Palace Theatre (Manuel Harlan)
Lighting Design by Neil Austin.

"I've always enjoyed coding. My dad worked in the computer industry, so it was only natural I became an early adopter."

Please don't shoot me down in flames RDM developers!)

But now RDM is a lot more stable and totally useable in the real world. As an example of its use, I now often don't bother pre-addressing ETC Source 4 Lustrs on a tour. Previously every unit would be pre-addressed and labelled and some time was spent ensuring the correct fixture was hung in the correct position. Now it's as quick to hang all the Lustrs in any order and position and then flash through them all (using RDM 'identify') and address them at that point. This can be particularly useful where an inexperienced crew are tasked with rigging FOH without supervision. 'Just hang the lights and we'll sort it out'.

I will give due mention at this stage to the DMXcat. Whilst my Goddard DMXter may still be my DMX test tool of choice, DMXcat has become my go to tool for all things RDM and moving light control.

CTI: You are an inventor, coder, and tinkerer. What things have you most enjoyed creating?

MC: I am notorious for having a top drawer full of half-finished half-baked inventions!

I've always enjoyed coding. My dad worked in the computer industry back in the day when it meant large mainframes sitting in air conditioned rooms, so it was only natural I became an early adopter. My first home computer was a 'BBC Micro' and 'Computer Science' was just on the curriculum at school. We all learnt BASIC which was brilliant but now of course we are told it's the most unstructured appalling language ever invented. But I was very happy with line numbers and GOTO statements!

I added a parallel port on to my BBC micro and connected it to my Rank Strand Mini 2 6 way dimmer rack allowing me to program chases. Although the parallel port only operated at TTL 5 volt levels and the analog control was 10 volts, so channels only ever bumped up to 50%! I was going to add a voltage doubling OP Amp, but got distracted by another idea, so never quite did.

I am amazed at the power now available in small and cheap microprocessors and development boards. My BBC micro I remember cost hundreds of pounds. Now for a few tens of pounds I can add half a dozen potentiometers to an 'Arduino' with an ethernet 'shield' and code my own lighting desk running sACN and ArtNet.

CTI: What changes in lighting technology do you think we'll see in the next few years? In 10 years?

MC: LEDs will continue to get brighter and brighter and so begin to replace the 2Kw and 5Kw fixtures which are still currently dominated by tungsten.

And slightly more out there – a whole new way of programming moving lights that doesn't tie a programmer to a control surface full of buttons. A coming together of 'heads up display', eyesight tracking and virtual reality glove technology.

For more information on Martin Chisnall, visit: www.mchisnall.co.uk

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