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at the Olivier Theatre, London

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Large-scale celebrations

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GLP's Impression LED fixture in-depth

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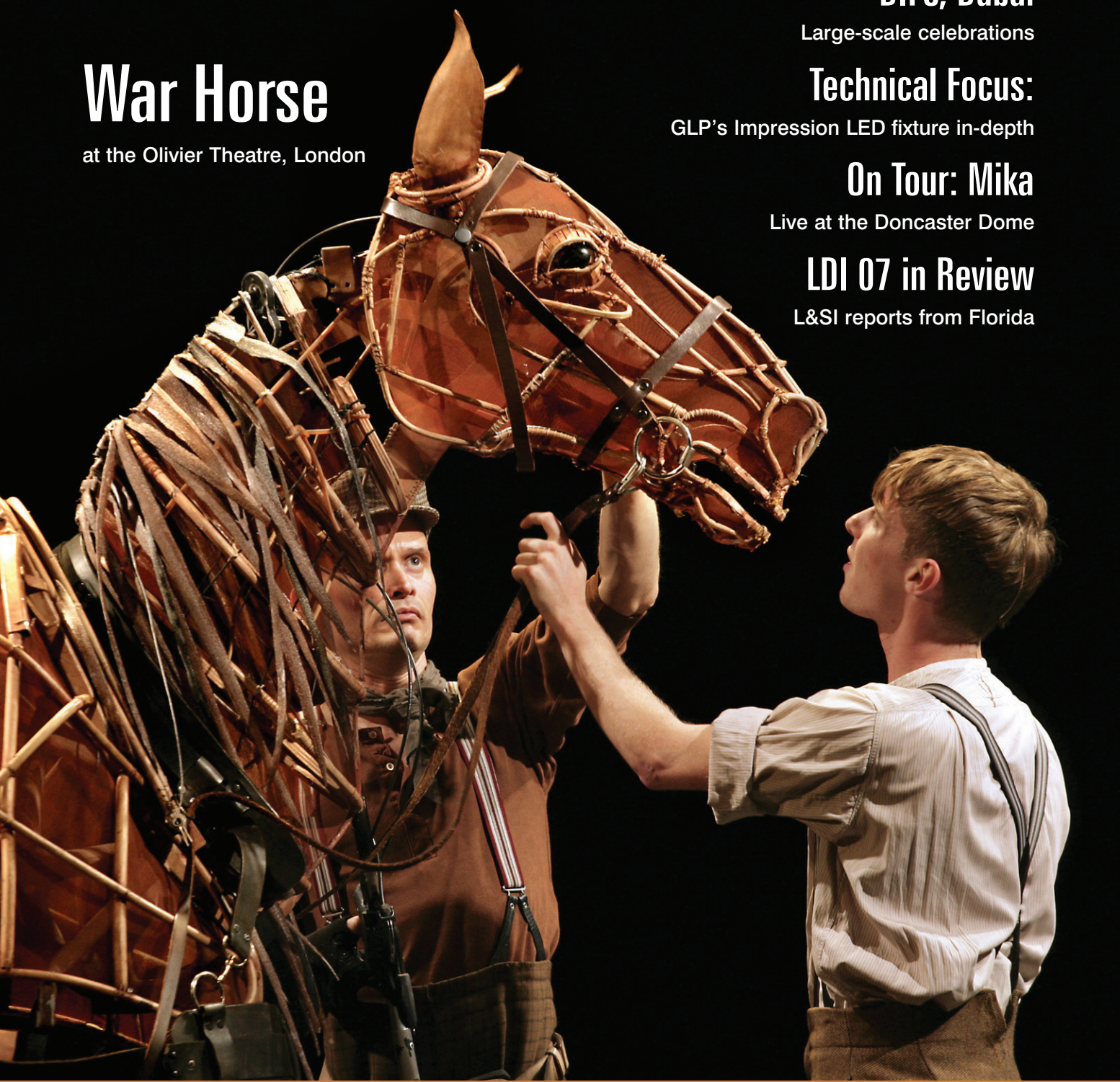


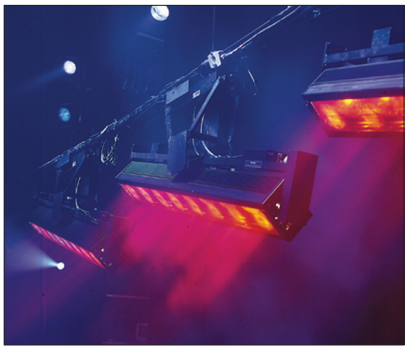
Classic Gear: The DHA Digital Light Curtain

Rob Halliday takes a nostalgic but instructive look back at the tools that have shaped the industry . . .

Sometimes classic products spawn classic successors. The high-tech successor to the ADB Svoboda batten is undoubtedly the DHA Digital Light Curtain, though between the two are a series of less high-tech products.

The 'light curtain' - a solid sheet of light rather than the familiar conical beam - has long been a favourite tool of lighting designer David Hersey. For the RSC's *Nicholas Nickleby*, he wanted the sheet to move - and achieved that by taking nine-lamp PAR 56 battens, thinner than the Svobodas, hinging one edge and attaching a flying bar to the other. The flyman was therefore in charge of the movement. For *Nickleby*'s spiritual successor, *Les Misérables*, there was a little more technology - an aerial rotator motor was added to one end, with the 'north-south-east-west' controller placed next to the lighting desk. *Miss Saigon* added custom Rainbow scrollers to this setup - now the light curtains could change colour, though each bar could still only move as one. The London production was a huge hit; a New York production was soon confirmed. Encouraged by Bobby Fehribach, the New York production electrician, Hersey decided to try to make the product he really wanted . . .

In just nine months, by early 1991, DHA Lighting's chief engineer Philip Nye created the



Digital Light Curtain. Eight VNSP PAR 56 12V 24W lamps in a compact housing within a motorised yoke carefully designed not to disrupt unit to unit lamp spacing; 20-frame colour scroller on the front; interlock to cut the power when changing lamps; transformer so that each unit could be run individually rather than the series-pairs of the older light curtains. Individual control of each unit meant you could make one sheet or separate areas of light.

Moving light control was not commonplace in 1990, so Nye invented his own. DLCs used their own language, LightTalk, controlled from their own software, LightMoves, that ran on Apple Macintosh computers. Each DLC had its own unique code - you didn't address them, merely wiggled them from the Mac, then patched to your channel of choice. Faulty lights could tell you. You could precisely align adjacent units from ground level. The software used real-world units - degrees - and colour names. And because the Mac was just sending instructions - 'turn 20 degrees in 30 seconds GO' - and the units were so well engineered, the movement had a rarely-matched smoothness. If some of this sounds familiar, it is doubtless because of Nye's involvement in the new ACN protocol, LightTalk's spiritual successor. Eventually, he did have to produce a DLC DMX interface, but even this was cleverly implemented: as you limited a DLC's movement range you increased its positional resolution.

Other lighting designers wanted variations - Andrew Bridge a six-lamp unit for *Sunset Boulevard*, Richard Pilbrow side-to-side movement for *Show Boat*, resulting in the remarkable Pitching Light Curtain. And never one to rest on his laurels, Hersey has taken the DLC back into shows that pre-date it, *Les Mis* in particular benefiting from the independent movement and greater colour choice the DLCs offer. As it approaches its seventeenth year, there is still nothing quite like it.

>>> www.dhalighting.co.uk/dlc.htm