



A local spotlight

Interview with Cirque Dreams Lighting Director Katie Johnston

By Kellie Abrahamson

The performers always get the credit, but anyone who has been backstage at a big theatrical production knows it takes a lot of behind-the-scenes hands to make those shows possible. EU caught up with one of those hands, Cirque Dreams Jungle Fantasy Lighting Director and Jacksonville native Katie Johnston, who was kind enough to give us the scoop on her cool gig and how she scored it.

EU: How long have you been with Cirque Productions?

Katie Johnston: I've been with them [for] about a year and a half.

EU: Is this your first show with them?

KJ: Yeah, it is. I started in September of 2006 on this show and we got a whole season and then we took a couple months off and [now] we're back for year number two.

EU: What are your duties as Lighting Director for Cirque Dreams?

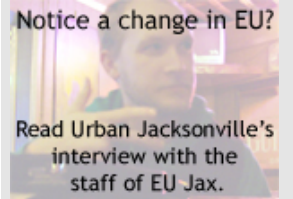
KJ: Well, kind of everything lighting. From setting up in the morning to focusing all the lights to making sure that [the show is] consistent from venue to venue because a lot of times theaters are smaller or bigger, sometimes we have to cut some stuff or add some stuff. It's really to kind of maintain the artistic integrity of the design; to make sure that it's the same beautiful product ion every single show.

EU: Are most theaters already equipped with the lighting gear you use in the show or do you need to bring in your own equipment?

KJ: The lights that don't move... are all provided locally and then we travel with all the moving lights and black light. The whole set is painted in UV paint so in the second half of the show we turn that on and it turns into this great psychedelic, black light sort of jungle. It's really cool.

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EU: How important is the lighting in Cirque Dreams Jungle Fantasy?

KJ: Well, actually I think it's pretty important [laughs]. I think really it just creates a landscape for the performers to be able to do what they do. It creates this great mood and sort of puts a beautiful painting on stage where they can really explore different depths of the jungles and texture and color. I think it [has] just kind of enhances the mood of the entire production.

EU: Once you've been assigned a show what's your process?

KJ: Well, this particular show was out for a couple of months doing some trial runs, so I already had an actual light plot, like an actual drawing of where the lights go on stage. So when I got hired, I came in and sat down with Neil Goldberg, the Artistic Director of the show, and we sat for 16 hours a day for a week and programmed all the lights and re-cued the show. We worked really hard to make sure everything is perfect and beautiful. So once the programming is down during the tech stages of the tour, then it becomes sort of a day-to-day challenge of maintaining that original look that we set.

EU: How did you become a lighting director?

KJ: I went to Stanton College Prep and did a bunch of theatre there and was really interested in it. The great thing about Stanton is that everyone there says, "You can do whatever you want to do. You have the world at your fingertips." So I thought if I have to work I might as well do something fun. I was like, "What's the funnest (sic) thing that I've done all year?" and at that point in my life it was going to a concert. So I was like "OK, well, I'm going to do lighting because that way I can go to shows and get paid to work and do something I love to do."

I moved up to Boston for college got a Bachelors in Fine Arts and Lighting Design and then I actually moved back to Jacksonville because I just love it and joined the local stagehand union and worked with them for four years and then I just really wanted to travel because I'm a travel-a-holic so touring seemed like the next best step. I've just sort of always done it, to be honest with you. I got a degree and just started working professionally. I'm one of those lucky people that the only job I've ever had is the job that I love.

Cirque Dreams Jungle Fantasy can currently be seen at the Moran Theatre at the Times-Union Center until Sunday, January 20. Tickets range in price from \$26 to \$54 for adults, \$30.50 to \$20.50 for children. For more information or to purchase tickets, please call (904) 632-3373 or visit artistseries.fccj.org.

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