

City Theatrical Talks With Chris Kurtz on *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time*



Photo by Joan Marcus

I recently had the chance to see [The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time](#) on Broadway at the Barrymore Theatre. Like many of the readers of this newsletter, when I attend the theatre, I am equally as interested in the lighting, set, and staging as I am in the acting and story. There is no doubt that this show, imported from [London's National Theatre](#), is an excellent drama about an interesting subject, with a strong cast who give great performances. But on the technology side, I think it is one of the most interesting plays I have seen in years, and it utilizes some very high tech elements to help tell the story.

The set is literally a black box, but is elevated to very high tech status with the addition of color changing LEDs embedded in the floor and walls, and projection that covers the every inch of the set. Overall, this show is an excellent example of state of the art lighting and projection design, and worth seeing for that reason alone.

Beyond those items, the show also makes use of some fun and clever battery operated wireless lighting devices controlled by wireless DMX, and that is the subject of our interview with the show's Deck Electrician, [Local One](#) member Chris Kurtz.

Credits:

Bunny Christie, Scenic & Costume Designer
Paule Constable, Lighting Designer
Finn Ross, Video designer
Marianne Elliott, Director
Jonathon Lyle, Video Programmer
Zach Peletz, Lighting Programmer
Howard Eaton Lighting Ltd., Set Lighting design
Greg Husinko, Production Electrician
Brent Oakley, Electrician
Matt Maloney, House Electrician

Interview with Chris Kurtz, Deck Electrician on *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

CTI: The show uses a lot of wireless, battery powered effects. Why was this important to the show?

CK: Toward the end of Act One the lead character begins to frantically build a train set that covers much of the stage with trees, buildings, bridges, and of course a train. As the act comes to a close the train begins to travel down the tracks on its way to London. As the train proceeds many of the units placed along the track begin to light up, then all black out at the end of the act. This could only be achieved by using a very low profile wireless DMX device and the [D2s](#) and [D4 Neo Dimmers](#) are perfect for the task. There is also a unit we call the "Magic Box" which is a completely enclosed translucent plexiglass box that lights up many different colors to convey different purposes. The box is handled and moved around stage many times in a variety of orientations. Wireless multi-channel DMX control is the only way to accomplish that.

CTI: Please describe each of the effects and how they are used in the show.

CK: We are using D2 Neo and D4 Neo wireless dimmers to power several props in the production. The bulk of them are used in the buildings, trees, and train cars for the train set that the lead character Christopher sets up during Act One. Most of the units use D2s. Each building has LED tape mounted inside. The trees have individual LEDs wired throughout their branches. The train engine is one of the two props using the D4 Neo. While the buildings and trees just need to light up, the engine needs to have power for the drive, LEDs, and smoke generator.

The other effect, known as the "Magic Box" is a translucent plexi box with both white and RGB LED tape suspended in the center of the unit as to allow all six sides to be illuminated evenly. This allows the box to serve many purposes. In one scene it is used as a television, a microwave, and fish tank. Being able to change colors helps to convey the idea of what the box is representing at that moment.

CTI: Were any of the effects challenging to build and control?

CK: The units were all built by Howard Eaton Lighting Limited in the UK. The D2s and D4s make them very easy to control. The dimming and color mixing on the Magic Box posed the biggest challenge with regards to the wireless effects. Greg Husinko modified the fade timing using RDM to get a smoother fade in the bottom ends of the LEDs.

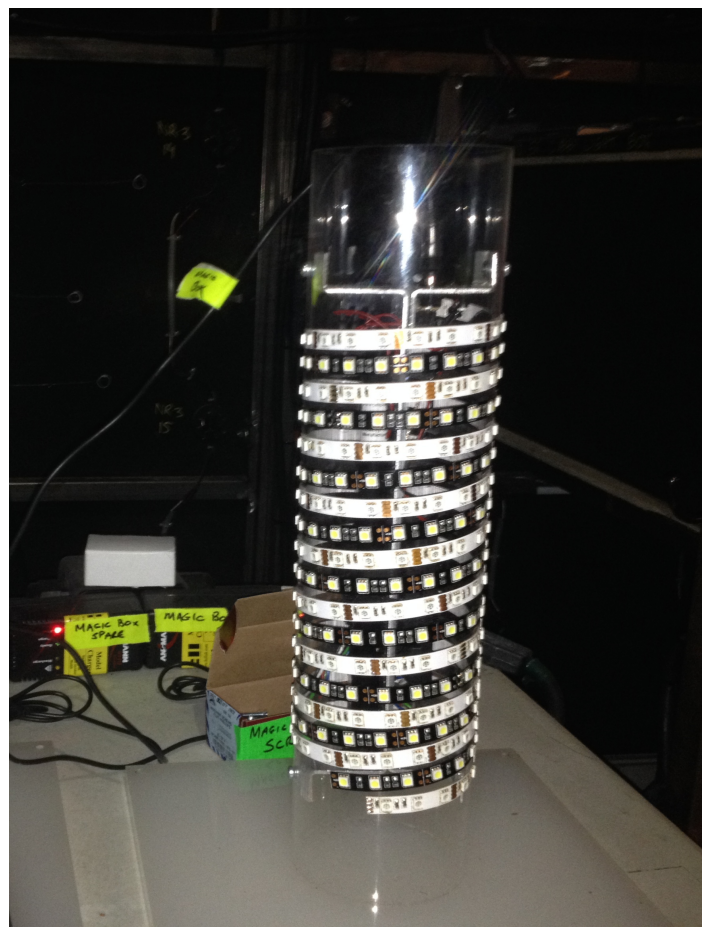


CTI: Who operates and maintains the effects?

CK: As Deck Electrician I am responsible for the maintenance of the wireless lighting effects. The train, trees and buildings as well as the "Magic Box." I also serve as the moving light and video system technician for the production. Our followspot operators Tim Altman and Greg Matteis are responsible for the confetti cannons. Brent Oakley and I work together to maintain the video lineup. The maintenance of the set LED will be a team effort depending on the issue.

CTI: I have limited this article to wireless dimming, but the show is extremely high tech for a play. What is it like working on a show with so much technology that is so important to the production.

CK: The creative team has done a remarkable job integrating all of the technology in a way that always assists the production. From setting the location to portraying the sense of chaos within Christopher's mind, the set, LED, video, lighting, and sound all come together to create a fully immersive experience. It is a reminder of what theater can be when everyone is on the same page. It was clear from the very start of tech that all departments were invested in Marianne's vision. The technology allowed the vision to be realized rather than distracting from it.





Photos by Joan Marcus

CTI: How have the demands on lighting technicians changed during your career. Where do you see that going in the future?

CK: Systems and networks. From a lighting and video standpoint our job as electricians has moved so far beyond reading plots and prepping cable. Understanding complex data systems and network configuration is so important now. From moving lights to video systems, consoles and nodes to LED products, knowledge and understanding of networks and systems is key. Looking forward, I can imagine more and more interactive technologies being integrated into productions. Either sets and units that react to actor handling or their movements perhaps. Video wise I see a hurdle of sorts being latency of live camera feeds. As technology advances and the delay between image capture and display shortens this could open up more opportunity for live camera integration.

CTI: What is your typical day like at the show?

CK: Basic show call for me starts at the video racks. Powering up the system and confirming all of the various parts are playing nice with each other. From there I head to deck and begin to power up and check all of the wireless units. Barring any issues with those I standby as Brent completes the rig check and address any issues that might come up. We then wait until around 30 minutes into the call to do our video lineup check. This is done for two reasons. First, Props has to load a drop gag up on the truss. Their presence on the truss can cause some sway in the projector rig. Waiting allows the rig time to settle. Secondly, the DS12KUs need some warm up time to settle in. There is some slight variance in image position over that first 30 minutes so waiting allows the units to reach full temperature and for any image shift to complete before we check lineup. Otherwise, if we checked alignment straight away by the time we got to half hour the lineup might not be as crisp as it could be. With a set that is made up of grid lines, this is very important.

CTI: What advice would you give a young technician today?

CK: Embrace the technology. Seek out opportunities to learn the new gear. At the same time, realize that technological know-how will not solve everything. Often it comes down to good old-fashioned problem solving. Use all of the resources available to you. From online tutorials to the wisdom of the older stagehands you work with. When all else fails I think of the words of Harold Larkin, Head Carpenter at Late Night with David Letterman, "You're a stagehand. Figure it out."