

Followspots and me

Sam Ohlsson has a solution for documenting followspots

 FOLLOWSPOT M A N A G E R

I work as a freelance lighting programmer, visualiser and draughtsman. I studied stage management and technical theatre at LAMDA, where the lighting aspect of productions beckoned. I began my professional career during my time there with my first job being a followspot operator on *We Will Rock You* at the Dominion Theatre, London. Since then, I have worked on numerous West End shows from *Wicked*, *Dreamgirls*, and *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* through to the RSC and the Royal Opera House. I have also had experience of large arena show tours, films, corporate events and international theatre productions.

Every lighting designer has their own style of documentation. Paperwork and accuracy are all significant elements of the work I do. I always take great care in updating all aspects, from the lighting plan to the followspot cue sheets, in order that the shows run to the designers' specification.

Having worked in a variety of theatres and productions, where an assortment of lighting cue sheets have been employed, from PDFs, spreadsheets and even rough notes on a scrap of paper, I felt a simpler, consistent but adaptable system

was necessary to improve the flow of information through the production process.

My initial thoughts were triggered while working full time as LX chargehand on *School of Rock*. The task of trying to update the cue sheets for the operators was difficult and frustrating at times.

Largely due to software and equipment limitations, within the department, and the lack of access to the software used to produce the initial lighting designs, numerous problems and issues were created.

Early in 2018, after discussing the application with different professionals in the industry, and being lucky enough to have the advice of other application developers, I made a start.

My original motivation was to create an easy method of cue data input, and the production of a visual and hardcopy record which could be a dynamic tool for the lighting designer, the lighting programmer and the follow-spot operator.

I created a basic app design specification, at which point it became obvious that not only was experience of the lighting environment required but also a significant knowledge of coding and programme development was essential.

This is where the second skillset came into play. Fortunately for me, my father, Chris, has had over 30 years of coding and testing experience in the IT industry. The combination of show experience and IT knowledge has been invaluable in creating and testing the software. If it wasn't for him this application wouldn't have come to light.

I sat down with different designers, programmers and operators to review the app specification, all of whom gave very useful advice and insights on what they would require from software to manage all of the operations needed. Taking their recommendations, we evolved and improved the software.

Our aims for FollowSpot Manager are to make the tasks of creating and ensuring followspot lighting cues are actioned with accuracy and consistency, as intended by the designer. We have created a free trial for anyone to use the application for 30 days. If you need any more information contact me at sam@followspotmanager.co.uk, or if you have any questions then head to the website: www.followspotmanager.co.uk. 

