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THE VARI-LITE VL2600 ENSURED THE SUN CAME OUT ON NBC'S 'ANNIE LIVE'

NBC's live musical production of much-loved classic, 'Annie Live,' was broadcast to an optimism-hungry US TV audience of over five million and a live audience of 350 in February. Producing such an ambitious live broadcast for TV is a technically and creatively elaborate affair. So, when multi-genre, award-winning lighting designer Bob Barnhart was asked to create the lighting for the three-hour live broadcast, he knew it would be a challenge.

Having already worked on NBC's live broadcast of 'Sound of Music,' Barnhart was keen to find a lighting tool that would offer him maximum technical and creative potential: "I wanted a Swiss Army Knife luminaire. A fixture that performs multiple tasks, without compromising on creativity." To that end, Barnhart selected the VL2600 PROFILE from Vari-Lite.

Barnhart needed a fixture that would deal with every possible lighting task, from scenic dressing to key lighting of characters, atmospherics, and mood-setting washes to direct face lighting for camera close ups and more. "Live television specials can be like uncaged animals," laughs Barnhart. "Even with the most basic of shows, we face multiple challenges. We're often short on time; in this case we only had four days for camera rehearsals! We can also be short on budget. With 'Annie Live,' the promise of four separate standing sets became four interchangeable sets in one smaller studio. This meant that instead of four lighting rigs, each dedicated to the individual scenes, I had to use one, very tightly packed rig to light them all individually, which naturally had an impact on the time I had with each."

In response, Barnhart designed a lighting rig packed with over 350 VL2600 PROFILE luminaires: "I like to keep my lighting plots simple," he explains. "Annie Live was a three-hour marathon, and over the course of the show, each individual light had at least 20 unique jobs to do. When it came to level and color, the scenic elements had to look the same, on camera in close ups as they did in wider and 360-degree panning shots. I think we came close to exhausting the VL2600s' capability, but they performed impeccably. I don't believe we had a single failure."

Amazingly, Barnhart had just one full, sequential run through of the show, before the live broadcast. This was his main opportunity to ensure that every shot made sense in terms of environmental and atmospheric continuity, angle, and level. From the grungy, earthy, darker colors of the orphanage to the rich opulence of the mansion, the live broadcast oozed drama and theatricality. Every shot evoked a sense of place, time, and mood, seducing the TV audience with Annie's charming story.

Pre-programming opportunities were also limited: "As with all creative pursuits, performer blocking and camera positions change during the process. This means I need an adaptable fixture, small, yet powerful enough to give me as many options as possible," Barnhart explains. "Finding the right key light at the appropriate angle for every shot, while achieving the right level of softness, that looks as good in close-up as it does in a wide shot, while maintaining continuity, can be a complex balancing act."



It's for that reason that Barnhart does not choose a fixture without first consulting the programmers he works with. "We want to know if a fixture is easy to program. Does it move fast enough? Does it return to its programmed focus and position with precision every time? The fact that the shutter goes all the way across the beam was a welcome time-saver as we were focusing to scenic elements fast. I didn't always have time to move the light to get the right shuttering. The VL2600 also has a good zoom ratio, a nice flat field, and the frost configuration enables me to produce a seamless wash with minimal loss of output."

Another significant consideration for Barnhart is setting the white balance with the cameras, as he discusses, "I prefer to use an LED fixture that features a single white source with an onboard diachroic color mix system. We achieve better intensity and less pixilation than mixing color using a multi-color LED Engine. From a television standpoint, we will always correct the light, but it doesn't take much to do that with the VL2600, so I don't lose output there either."

As Barnhart says: "You don't always need a fiesta platter of gear in your rig to achieve a dynamic, versatile lighting design. You just need the right size to output ratio in the fixture and enough flexibility in its capability to cover all bases. The VL2600 PROFILE does exactly that." ■



PRODUCTS FEATURED:
VL2600 PROFILE

LIGHTING DESIGNER: BOB BARNHART

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APPLICATION: TV & FILM, THEATRE