

Tokyo Story

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The adventures of an American LD in Japan

Most LDs have no idea where their next job is coming from, but that's the freelance life. Sometimes, however, one job leads to another in a thoroughly unexpected way. So it was with Guy Smith, a New York-based LD who, for a few weeks this winter, was surprised to find himself the toast of the Tokyo nightclub scene.

Here's how it happened. Smith, you may recall, designs lighting for a variety of live events, including theatre, but he's something of a specialist in gay circuit parties, including the famous/infamous White and Black Parties, those weekend-long dance marathons that draw crowds from all over the world each year (See "On the Circuit with Guy Smith," *LD* June 2002).

Even though the crowds are primarily gay, however, Smith says, "There's a clique of Japanese men and women — they're straight — who come every year to the Black Party. Some of them came to the Saint [the birthplace of the Black Party] 20 years ago. They just love the music and the lights." Last year, a group of them formed a partnership to open a club in Tokyo that would recreate the Black Party ambiance for mostly straight audiences — and they asked Smith to be the LD.

The result was Ageha (pronounced a-GAY-ha), which in Japanese means butterfly, a multilevel indoor/outdoor venue that comes complete with swimming pool, and can accommodate up to 5,300 guests. Smith says it's an unusual concept for Japan, where "clubs tend to be smaller, lower-key, more about the sound systems." Located in a neighborhood of warehouses near a docking area in Tokyo, Ageha is poised to add a unique, large-scale experience to that city's party scene.

Smith is now an expert in the perils of ultra-long-distance design projects. He has also learned about cultural relations, dealing with non-English speaking crew, a different pace of work, and the difficulties of shipping gear across the Pacific Ocean.

"They asked me to submit proposals for the club," Smith recalls, adding that he sent in three designs, "one of which was spun off of last year's Black Party rig." He then flew to Japan for a meeting with the club's management and structural engineers, communicating with them through an interpreter. "I showed them all three proposals, and they wanted the moving-truss concept, à la the Black Party," he says. (For that event, the LD had designed a truss that was, he says, "totally angular. There was one right angle, and all the rest of the trussing was hinged. The centerpiece was a cross.")

The only problem, says Smith, is that truss control systems are relatively unheard-of in Japan, thanks to strict safety codes. Therefore, a system had to be created from the ground up. The LD worked with a team of engineers whose experience is in factory construction; working with him through e-mail, they took the designer's drawings and created a motor control system for the lighting and sound that gives the club much of its sensory excitement. The cost of the control system was \$1.2 million. "You've never seen a more perfectly hung rig," Smith says, adding that he designed the interface for the truss's control, but not the software.

"I am not a software designer — I would not know where to begin with writing code," he says, "but I knew that I wanted the interface to be capable of certain automatic moves, and at-a-glance problem-solving information. I

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wanted a graphic display that would tell me where trusses are numerically, so I could compare it to the view from the booth and ensure the counters on the wire rope drums were working. I wanted to have manual buttons which lit in three colors on a graphic plate of the plot displaying their real positions. They provided all that, and a fail-safe system which prevents load imbalance and excessive torque on the truss. They also set speeds appropriate to the loads."

The truss structure was built by James Thomas in Knoxville, then was to be shipped in crates to Japan, for the unbelievably low price of \$1,500. "I found a multinational shipping company, Panel Pena," says Smith. "They ship things to the US and, normally, their containers return empty," which explains how he got such a favorable rate. However, the shipment coincided with a dockworkers' strike in Long Beach last fall so, suddenly, the entire truss system was stranded in the US. Faced with the prospect of his truss languishing in Long Beach, CA, for an indefinite period, Smith got busy and persuaded the shipping company to step in and agree to send the truss to Japan by air for just under \$7,000.

Japanese lighting distributor M Tech Style supplied the lighting gear for Ageha, which includes a variety of Martin Professional units, among others. Once the equipment was specified, the real fun began for Smith, who arrived for the installation and found that nobody on the crew spoke any English. Smith had taken a few Japanese lessons and there were translators on hand but, he says, laughing, "I pointed a lot." The going was a little bit tough at first, as they worked 19-hour days to get the rig properly hung. But he says he loved working with the crew, once he understood their methodology. "In Japan, everything has a due process," he says. "They expected me to work more slowly. The programming only took a few hours; they thought it should take a day."

Part of Smith's job was to train an assistant, Mr. Ashimine, to run the Wholehog® II control board. Smith spoke a smattering of Japanese, Ashimine spoke few words of English, so "a lot of training was hands-on, showing him what to do, then correcting him. He would try to emulate my style. He picked up on it remarkably fast, even though I got frustrated and had to apologize."

The club opened on New Year's Eve with a series of live performances by such disco divas as Jocelyn Brown and Loleeta Holloway. Smith was nonplussed to learn, however, that he was being publicized as one of the club's main attractions. "They don't have celebrity DJs so much in Japan, like we do here. So they started mentioning me," relying on his association with the Black Party. Whether or not Smith proved to be the draw, the early crowds were healthy. Thanks to the LD, Tokyo nightlife has captured a different, darker sort of glamour.

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CLUB AGEHA

Lighting Equipment

- 12 Martin Professional MAC 2000s
 - 16 Martin RoboScan Pro 918s
 - 18 Martin MAC 500s
 - 4 Martin MAC 600s
 - 16 Martin Atomic strobes
 - 1 Flying Pig Systems Wholehog II console
 - 1 ETC Express 250 console
- PAR cans
ETC Sensor dimmers
James Thomas Engineering¹⁰³ custom trussing



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