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Blackout premiers with great support from the industry and beyond

At the beginning of May, a two-year project came to be realised for inspirational Guildford School of Acting lighting tutor Michelle (Mig) Burgess when her unique design installation Blackout was revealed to the industry.

Harnessing the collective powers of light, sound and video in the hope of affecting genuine changes in an approach to mental health, Mig set about on her quest over two years ago.

Mig is searingly open about living with Bipolar II disorder - a condition with which she was finally diagnosed in her late twenties. And for the past couple of years, she has been formulating a plan to create a design installation to portray, in a sensory way, the mental journey inside a Bipolar II patient's head as they transition through a manic episode.

The result has been a highly provocative, moving installation, experienced alone for six minutes, and which, over the course of 4 days was seen by over 250 industry professionals, venue operators, young people and mental health experts.

Sometimes actions speak louder than words and this is how Mig wanted the piece to be portrayed.

"I'm a creative - it is far easier to express my feelings through art than through words. And literally, as the strapline of Blackout explains, 'sometimes the lights go out in my head'."

The installation is set in a quiet, closed black box, and each visitor is asked to step through LED strips and up onto a steel deck platform and into the truss structure to stand in the very centre of the piece. By looking beyond the LED strips it is possible to see four video screens placed around the structure. The timecoded Blackout sequence starts off with the wall projections (life outside Mig's head) and LED lighting (Mig's brain) being harmonious and pleasant - all functioning like clockwork. As this dips into the bipolar spectrum - often triggered by an external event - the brain's 'normal' activities start to shut down and disengage from the world around ... as the mood irrevocably sinks.

At its lowest point, all the lights go out completely, with the world around - on the projection screens - continuing, oblivious. This is the dark and inhospitable place that Chester Bennington, lead vocalist of Linkin Park described as having absolutely "no sunshine".

From this isolated, dark place, the next section of the installation evokes the process of how the brain starts to return to normal, a process which in real life can take several days or weeks.

When the recovery is complete, the lighting sequence and the bipolar cycle return to the devised start sequence as the person regains balance, structure, and some sort of control.

It's meant to be hard-hitting, and it's meant to be brave. And for some, perhaps a little uncomfortable to be in a black box, alone, with all your senses being challenged around you.

The creative team role call is certainly impressive and made up of a number of recognised industry professionals all of whom are long-term friends of Mig's. "I had to bide my time to ensure that if I went ahead, I could deliver the project to a high enough standard to do the installation justice" explains Mig. "Whilst the birth of my daughter Chloe was a driving force - because I wanted her to see her mum being strong, open and honest about Bipolar II - I also needed to find a calendar slot where all my high profile (and much-in-demand) design team could come together in one place. Plus, I also needed the backing of some key companies for equipment support, as well as to secure the final injection of seed money to get the project off the ground."

Finn Ross is a university friend "who just happens to be a fabulous and talented, award-winning video designer", smiles Mig. "And the first person I broached Blackout to was theatre director Simon Anderson who I have previously worked with and known for many years. I wanted his opinion and advice as a director as this wasn't my field of expertise. Together we had numerous challenging discussions about the design choices and the direction of the piece, but I knew he understood me and could support me alongside his skillset in theatre creation. And my husband, Paul Burgess of Sadlers Wells - well, it was imperative to have him with me on this journey, and apart from being my life partner, there is the bonus of him being a talented lighting designer and technician. Finally, Zoe Milton is an audio version of me - so she had to be on the team as our sound designer."

Simon Anderson was intrigued from the start but quickly realised how important it was to get involved. "I love theatre and see the arts as a force for change - in our increasingly distant society where we sit in front of a computer rather than talk, theatre is one of the last truly communal experiences. Blackout is a totally unique way of engaging people's emotions and affecting them in a non-conventional way. It was my job to translate what was in Mig's head into something which would engage with a stranger. It was an incredible directorial challenge!"

And the challenges were significant for all the team - from both a technical design point of view as well as a personal point of view.

"I wanted to create something using technical theatre arts mediums to create, and explain my mental health condition and how it feels to experience hyper mania and manic lows" explains Mig. "Initially my design was inspired by Kanye West's Glastonbury performance where he had the old school rig of PAR cans above and around him with the lighting team running video content through it and using the PARs as a crude video wall. I felt the analogue look created by rows of lights in a box formation accurately depicted the activity in my brain, and were like neurons."

"However, as the concept evolved (like any good idea!), we realised that LED would be a cleaner, and more efficient way to use light with the correct ratio to see through the product and have visual access to the screen content behind. With the support of Light Initiative, the LED noodles added another dimension and proved to be the perfect product."

By using technology alone, Blackout has been described by Mig as a 'theatrical show with no cast', creating a challenge for theatre director Simon. In this respect, Simon and Mig believe Blackout is technically ground-breaking where the director is directing the technology to tell the story. "A cast is the director's comfort zone" says Simon. "You spend several weeks with them and then you apply the

technical aspects of the show in production week, secure in the knowledge you have the cast on board. With Blackout there is no such safety net and I needed to make sure we didn't lose sight of the story we were telling through these technical elements. In a very real sense the lighting, the sound, the vibrations, the projections all became the cast."

It is an incredibly personal and revealing work for Mig. "For me, the biggest challenge with the project has been having the condition - and trying to communicate Bipolar II in as honest and realistic way possible whilst going through it. Throughout the build week I found myself very much living the cycles we were trying to portray. It was a classic case of art imitating life - providing a very real reference point for me as well as my team. Using myself as the case study for Blackout has been exposing and at times scary, but I had incredible colleagues around me who doubled up as my support team, protected me, and made me feel safe."

There has also been significant support from the industry. Whilst Robe have spearheaded this as key sponsor providing the seed money to make the concept a reality as well as key lighting fixtures including the brand new T1 and Cycbar 15 linear LED strips, several other companies have pulled together, providing rehearsal and pre-production spaces, a WYSISWYG suite for programming, and equipment to make Blackout happen.

Josef Valchar (CEO Robe) travelled from the Czech Republic specifically to support Mig and attend the launch event, and his feelings reflect the overall mood of the companies who have supported Blackout. "We have been delighted to work with Mig and her creative team to make her project a reality. It was fascinating to experience the final installation first-hand and all of us at Robe admire her bravery in addressing the challenges she faces with this condition in such an open and honest way. I hope very much that this valuable installation will go on to be seen by very many more people, and will provide invaluable insight, understanding, and discussion surrounding the issues of mental health - not just in our industry - but in a broader community as well."

Blackout also has a serious academic side to it as its audience is part of some important research being conducted by Dr Paul Hanna - Senior Lecturer and Research Director in Clinical Psychology at University of Surrey. A primary research question will be whether a bespoke art installation can change attitudes, beliefs and understandings of what it's like for individuals diagnosed with Bipolar II. This research will explore the perceptions of audience members both before and after experiencing Blackout about mental health. It is hoped the results of this research will extend far beyond the parameters of the industry and into the wider community. "I know the arts can work with science to make a difference" states Mig. "Let's see what impact the technologies used in this installation - light, audio and video - can have in helping to improve understanding and provoke more discussion around mental health."

Mig has been overwhelmed by the reaction to Blackout. "I am truly humbled at the enthusiasm and support I have had from everyone that has been a part of making Blackout happen. From the earliest days of the project, everyone has been supportive and one of the most rewarding aspects has been that companies and individuals have put their company hats to one side, and worked towards the

common goal of making this happen, and by doing so, promoting mental health. This level of industry collaboration is hopefully an example and an inspiration to my students.”

That collaboration was also evident in the way the production team worked. Simon explains: “Normally in theatre you operate in your silo until production week. Here, everyone had a creative voice from the get-go – it was a truly collaborative process – so Blackout was not only breaking new ground in what we were addressing, but in the way we were working as well. That collaboration and camaraderie was immensely rewarding.”

“The reaction has been the most rewarding part of the process – seeing the responses of the people coming out of the installation was evidence enough for me, that after the intense journey of the production, it had all been worthwhile,” concludes Simon.

So, what next for Blackout? Mig and her team have always been determined this launch should just be the start – and they are working to bring Blackout to the widest possible audience – and to reach beyond the industry boundaries and an arts audience, providing access to anyone who wants to know more and/or needs support in their own mental health journey. And, hopefully, in some small way, to help end the stigma of those suffering with mental health issues. Plans are afoot to gain more funding – hopefully from government as well as from the industry – in order to achieve all this.

“I see Blackout as much more than just a design installation. Yes, I believe that creatively as a design team we have created something beautiful to evoke, through light, sound and video, key emotions of someone with Bipolar II,” reflects Mig. “But I want to provoke more discussion around the topic of mental health in this industry, and beyond. And so, if the only message I manage to get out there with this installation, is that ‘it’s ok to not be ok’ then I feel something worthwhile has been achieved. I hope that being so open with my struggle, and expressing it in this light, sound and video installation, that it will resonate with our amazing industry, and help encourage people to be a little kinder to each other.”

One thing is for sure – even with its short, 4-day run at GSA, the impact of Blackout has already been significant.

Come and hear Mig talk more about the Blackout project at PLASA Focus, Leeds on Wednesday 15th May when she will be one of the panellists on a seminar addressing mental health issues at the Bury Theatre, Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds, 12.15pm – 1.15pm.

Photo Credit: Mig Burgess & Steve Porter









