

# Wall of Sound

**John Black** is one of our most loved alumni bringing his skills, passion and talent back home to SFS! Here John explains the first steps of his career and how taking advantage of opportunities in school - and how being inspired by a great teacher and mentor - can help shape the path you eventually follow.

My journey and passion for entertainment production technology began while in Seoul Foreign Elementary School. Before the Lyso Center for the Performing Arts was constructed, the main large gathering space on campus was the UAC. The current bouldering room used to be a stage with large barn doors that opened up to the gym proper. That space was used for concerts, high school graduations, international fair performances, and all-school gatherings. When I was in fifth grade, I was attending the annual

Hearts to Serve assembly and noticed some high school students sitting at a table with a lot of equipment on it. I was curious. At some point shortly thereafter, I spoke with my choir teacher about those students. What were they doing? How could I learn to do that? How could I get involved? He directed me to DJ Johnson, the SFS faculty member working in the technology office.

I still remember walking into the technology

office for the first time. The entrance was from the Middle School back stairwell, and upon opening the door you entered a maze of old metal shelving filled with computer parts and equipment that wound through the office and created small workspaces for each staff member. I found my way to DJ and asked how I could get involved and learn about lighting and sound, and from there my journey began. Seoul Foreign didn't offer any stagecraft or technical theatre courses, but I dedicated myself through personal study and involvement to learning the technology and the craft. I spent many hours during my middle and high school years setting up and operating equipment around campus and in Robb Hall Theatre. I was nicknamed the "Titan of Tech" by Dale Wood, one of my high school English teachers, which I had completely forgotten about until reconnecting on an SFS campus tour last spring.

Long story short, I knew from fifth grade what my passion was and what I wanted to do with my life. I didn't know whether it would take me into the touring industry, professional theatre, corporate production - and certainly not returning to SFS. Yet this is where God called me. After completing my degree in Theatre Design and returning to Seoul Foreign, I found myself organizing and training a High School student production crew, Crusader Live, of over

twenty students within two years and shortly thereafter offering an independent study in Lighting Design and Technology for high school student Patrick TomHon. It's amazing how life has come full circle.

My view on technical production at Seoul Foreign is simple - as much as is possible, let students be hands-on and assume roles with responsibility. Students participating in Crusader Live are not part of an after-school club in the traditional sense. They join Crusader Live as apprentices, learning and performing tasks as carpenters, electricians, stagehands, followspot operators, camera crews and engineers. They touch and are involved in the entire technical production process and the variety of roles and responsibilities that come with that and without their involvement, the quality and scale of what we put on the stage wouldn't be the same.

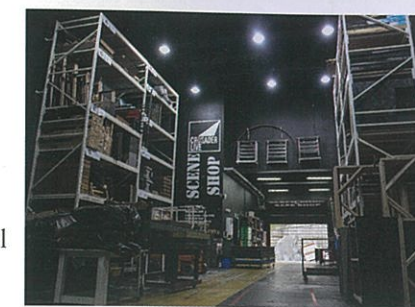
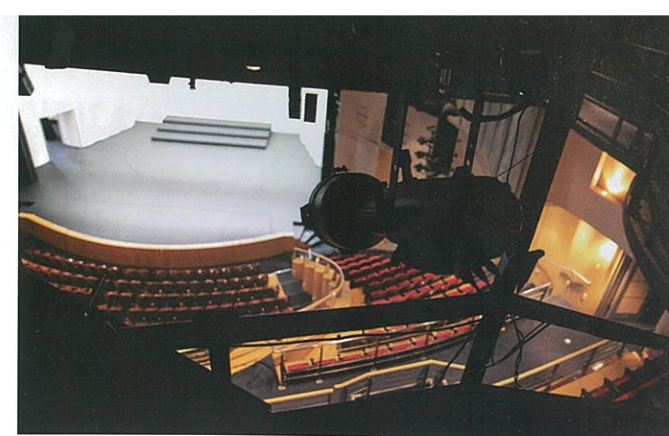
Seoul Foreign has invested in purpose-built performance facilities, each with specific considerations and purposes in mind. Whether in the 701-seat Mainstage Theatre, 454-seat Robb Hall Theatre or the intimate Black Box Theatre, audiences can enjoy and experience high-quality performances and events. The Mainstage Theatre was acoustically designed to meet the needs both of unamplified instrumental and vocal ensemble performances, as well as the staging and production needs for large-scale drama productions. Though large in capacity, the total depth of the auditorium doesn't exceed 20 meters from the last row of chairs to the stage, allowing for unamplified events to be possible. Robb Hall Theatre was acoustically designed to allow for unamplified spoken-word presentations and events, catering to its high use as a class assembly presentation venue. It offers a much more intimate feel when compared to the Mainstage Theatre, and has been an excellent facility for smaller dramas. The Black Box Theatre, our most intimate setting, is an excellent acoustic space for smaller events, but especially small music recitals and performances. Each facility is purpose-built and we are blessed to have all three options available to support our over thirty performing arts event season and over nine hundred additional events each year.

At the time of this writing we are in the production phase for *Les Miserables*. In my time at SFS both as a student and on staff, this will be the first entirely sung drama production on one of our stages. As such, the audio needs are much more complex than in the musicals we have previously produced. One of the production roles that Crusader Live members enjoy the most is that of 'microphone technician.' For *Les Miserables* we have four microphone technicians

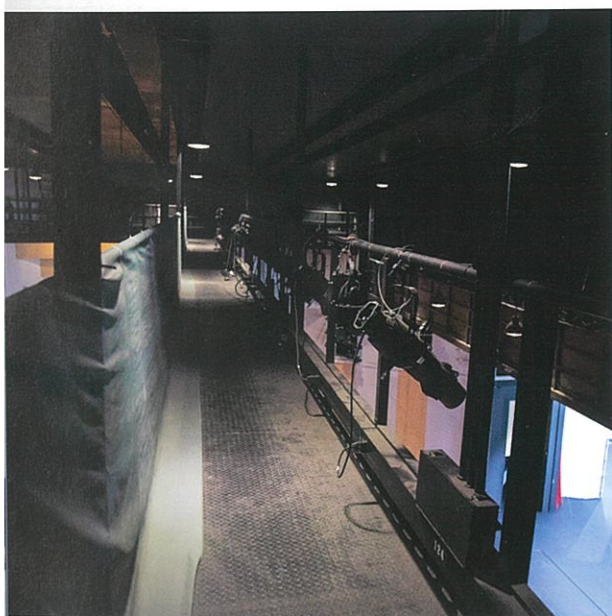
whose job it is to fit and change the wireless microphone transmitters throughout the run of the show. We have seventeen microphone transmitters that will rotate between thirty-eight actors and actresses throughout the performance and it is the job of the microphone technicians to make these exchanges and ensure that microphones are properly fitted to the right performer at the right time!

The sound engineer - myself for this production due to its complexity - operates the audio control console throughout the production. We are fortunate to have a fully digital control system so that our productions can have settings and cues programmed and recalled throughout a show. The overarching goal is that each line delivered by an actor or actress can be clearly heard and that a good overall balance between all audio sources is achieved. From the first note the orchestra plays of *Les Miserables* to the very end of the bows, there are over 250 audio console 'snapshots' recalled depending on what microphones are on stage and who is wearing them.

In total, over thirty high school students built and prepared technical and scenic elements for *Les Miserables* and fourteen are working in production roles during performances. The experiences and opportunities that these students have to be involved and explore the production field don't even compare to the humble beginnings that were available to me when I was a student. But what I hope hasn't changed is the support and care of the faculty and staff who once recognized a spark in a certain fifth grade kid. My interest became a passion, and my passion became my calling. I am grateful to DJ Johnson, Edie Moon, and others who believed in me, who provided opportunities for my interests and skills to grow, and for being role models that I can look back on now as I invest in and work with students today.



Top: One of four followspots in the Mainstage Theatre, Lyso Center  
Second to top: Backstage workshop for Crusader Live



Lighting catwalk in the Mainstage Theatre, Lyso Center.

*Les Miserables* whole crew with Crusader Live students in the front. Photo by Siwon Lee (G10).

