

PROJECTION LIGHTS & STAGING NEWS

30 FESTIVAL ROUNDUP

ZEDD at Coachella

COVER IMAGE: ELIZABETH RAE

12

BUYERS GUIDE
Film & TV Lighting



WHAT'S HOT

18

BEHIND THE DESIGN
Katy Perry: *The Lifetimes Tour*

22

PRODUCTION SPOTLIGHT
Rauw Alejandro: *Cosa Nuestra World Tour*

24

DESIGN INSIGHT
Halsey: *For My Last Trick: The Tour*

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COLOR STRIKE M | STRIKE V | STRIKE BOLT 1C | STRIKE ARRAY 2C | STRIKE ARRAY 4C | STRIKE SABER 10
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SHINNYO LANTERN FLOATING HAWAII

By Adrienne Gurman

The *Shinnyo Lantern Floating Hawaii* — *Many Rivers, One Ocean* is more than just an annual ceremony at Ala Moana Beach in Honolulu, HI. It's a deeply significant Buddhist tradition where candle-lit lanterns are floated in the water, each one representing a profound sense of gratitude and a heartfelt prayer unique to everyone who participates. Produced by Shinnyo-en, an international Buddhist community grounded in the cultivation of wisdom and love embodied in the Buddha's teaching, this year's hour-long ceremony, broadcast live across the Hawaiian Islands and Japan on Memorial Day, was a powerful demonstration to the importance of this observance, drawing 50,000 people in attendance.

Production and Lighting Designer, Hideaki Tsutsui's journey with the *Shinnyo Lantern Floating Hawaii* (SLFH) started in 2007 when he worked with the program's lighting designer as an electrician, a role he wholeheartedly embraced while living in Hawaii. It was at that first ceremony that Tsutsui developed a deep emotional connection to the ancient tradition, one that kept him returning year after year, both personally and professionally.

As a theatrical lighting designer working internationally for over two decades, Tsutsui's unwavering passion and dedication for lighting design and harmony propelled him to the role of Lighting Designer for the ceremony in 2012, and, in 2023, he was appointed Production Designer for the entire event.

Embracing one of the tenets of Shinnyo-en, a belief that anyone can become aware of the infinite possibilities hidden within themselves, Tsutsui built upon this idea when designing this year's ceremony. "In a time of global uncertainty and division, the *Shinnyo Lantern Floating Ceremony* is a signal of hope, highlighting live events' ability to unite people through shared experiences. This year's theme, *Many Rivers, One Ocean*, honors our shared humanity and the loved ones we have lost. Just like all the rivers on earth eventually lead into one ocean, we as humans are all connected," explained Tsutsui in a recent interview with *PLSN*.

Solutions to Challenges

The production design for this event presents a tapestry of unique challenges, primarily due to its stunning but unpredictable outdoor location by the beach. The task of building the staging amidst the elements is ever demanding. "For future planning, to facilitate the design and logistics, our Technical Director has proposed the intriguing idea of enlisting a construction-based survey team to meticulously assess the terrain and determine the precise placement of the stage on the sandy shoreline," says Tsutsui. "The production process began with identifying the center line, determining angles, and deciding on the stage's strategic positioning—a critical foundation for the event. Also, having a production company that knows and understands the area's distinctive terrain is imperative. We have worked with the local production company, OnStage Hawaii, for two years. They bring a wealth of experience and their mastery over staging and lighting, coupled with their deep-rooted knowledge of the local environment, has proven invaluable."

Tsutsui described the challenges of designing such a large-scale, outdoor, live-televised event by reflecting on lessons he learned during his theater touring days. He recalled how every theater on a specific tour differs from the next, each presenting its unique logistical and scenic design obstacles. These challenges could range from the size and shape of the stage to the available lighting equipment and the local architectural style. To help meet each theater's challenges, Tsutsui likes to consult and seek wisdom from local artisans and designers who have worked in the theater who could provide innovative solutions. "This collaborative approach not only helps to solve the design challenges but also nurtures strong professional relationships emphasizing the value of local insights in event production," he comments.

Embodying Harmony

At the core of the collaboration on the *SLFH* lies the concept of "Wa," a Japanese word that embodies harmony. Tsutsui emphasized the significance of everyone on site working cohesively, as opposed to creating friction. This ethos enhanced not only the event's overall impact but also cultivated a sense of communi-



ty among everyone involved, something not taken lightly due to the challenges of staging amid sprawling sand dunes and the vast ocean, both compounded by the whims of nature. The show's technical director and director of staging oversaw the construction, paying careful attention to every detail, especially in the breezy Hawaiian winds. Walls were erected with precision, and care was taken to secure every component, mindful of the weight limits for the lighting towers and sprawling trusses.

In years past, the lighting team often focused solely on managing fixtures that were primarily designed for indoor settings. Tsutsui recounted how even the slightest drizzle would raise alarms; the master electrician would start signaling to turn off the lights. In prior events, the production team had to cover the lighting trusses with plastic sheets each night. The team would have to lower the trusses and cover each individual fixture, a cumbersome task. "Fortunately, the technology has advanced significantly, and today's lighting fixtures are all IP rated, meaning they are specifically designed to endure various outdoor conditions including unexpected rain," says Tsutsui. "This innovation brought us all a sigh of relief, allowing us to focus on the creative aspects of our work rather than worrying about the elements. Today's technology lets the team to focus on creativity and artistry, enjoying our work without the constant fear of nature's unpredictability."

Tsutsui shared his insights regarding his lighting equipment and gear choices, particularly the fixtures' durability against weather complications. "I really admired the quality of available fixtures from OnStage Hawaii—including the GLP impression X5 Bars, and the "super bright" Vari-Lite VL3600s. They are amazing,



PRODUCTION TEAM

Creative Director: Kathy Muneno
Broadcast Director: Keli'i Grace
Production Designer: Hideaki Tsutsui
Assistant Production Designer: Marissa Diaz
Production Manager: Kenji Stevens
Production Electrician: Joe Freeman
Lighting Programmer: Steve Fisher
Director of Staging: Kourtney Kanno
Hawaii Stage Technical Director: Gordon Svec
Hawaii Stage Head Carpenter: Michael Martin
NEP Broadcast Services Technical Manager: Dave Golz
Video Engineer/V1: Joey Lopez

VENDOR

Lighting: OnStage Hawaii

GEAR

Lighting

12 Chauvet Maverick Storm 2 BeamWash
 12 Chauvet Ovation
 25 GLP impression X4 Bar
 24 GLP impression X5 Bar
 18 Martin MAC Viper
 25 Vari-Lite VL3600 Profile IP
 2 Lycian M2 Followspot
 2 grandMA3 Lighting Console

game-changers. The VL3600s were a successful as front lights at 50% power, even though they were positioned nearly 100' from the stage. Our setup was remarkable, especially with the perfect balance of light that the video engineer and I achieved—it was impressive."

Collaborative Process

Tsutsui described a harmonious collaboration between the design team and Kathy Muneno, Creative Director of SLFH 2025. "Early on, Kathy introduced the concept of using Ha (a Hawaiian term which translates to 'breath') within the show's sub-theme. This idea profoundly influenced my scenic design. I organized the stage into three distinct circular sections, each one including various components: the ceremony area; Shomyo which is the chorus presentation; and Taiko (Japanese drum) stage. The design featured three interconnected circles, symbolizing a con-

tinuous flow of breath that unites the space and the audience.”

Tsutsui continues, “In the initial stages of our collaboration, we went through a rich process of iteration. I presented several design variations, and we engaged in thorough discussions about each element to understand what resonated with the creative team and what did not. It was a crucial phase, and as a designer trained in theater, I found this iterative process rewarding, allowing us to refine our ideas collectively. Kathy shared her concerns regarding the two prominent upstage towers, suggesting they could detract from the scenic beauty we aimed to highlight. I completely understood her perspective since we were striving to emphasize the lush Hawaiian environment. In response to her feedback, I pushed the two upstage towers as far away from the stage as possible. However, this strategic move came with its own challenges, as the distance created a significant span of over 50’ that prevented us from installing trusses between the towers. Consequently, I had to make the tough decision to sacrifice backlighting, which I typically rely on to enhance the visual depth of the performance.”

Balancing the Looks

While adjusting to the absence of a backlight created a unique challenge, Tsutsui adapted by positioning some of the lighting on a diagonal angle, which proved effective. He recognized that the camera had two choices: it could incorporate the illuminated towers as part of a striking stage composition or zoom in to eliminate them, focusing on the serene beauty of the beach and coconut trees in the background without any technical distractions. Initially, he was apprehensive about the lack of backlight, which left him grappling with both of his scenic and lighting design responsibilities.

“Fortunately, the camera positions were ideal, as there were no overhead shots directed at the upstage area. The camera setup was well thought out, and while we utilized some drone

shots, their distance ensured that the towers were not an overwhelming visual element,” Tsutsui continues. “The diagonal positioning of the lighting helped mitigate the need for backlight, and we spent considerable time programming the cues to guarantee that all performers on stage received adequate highlighting. This careful manipulation of lighting is essential, as it creates an illusion of depth that enhances the overall two-dimensional appearance captured by the camera. Despite the challenges, I was thrilled with the result; when reviewing recordings later, I was satisfied that our creative decisions had paid off.”

The ceremony is structured into three main parts: the first segment serves as an introduction, which includes videos that explain the overall theme and background. Following this is a procession featuring priests, transitioning into the middle section that centers on the ceremony. The final third culminates in a dramatic release of lanterns, occurring after a ceremonial bell is rung, inviting the audience to participate in releasing lanterns to float from the water’s edge out onto the ocean.

Day to Night

Regarding the event’s runtime of one precisely orchestrated hour, the team faced the crucial timing of the event. The ceremony began at 6:30 p.m. and concluded at 7:30 p.m. During this hour-long window, the sky transitions from the bright colors of daylight to a warm sunset and into the deep twilight, ultimately culminating in full darkness.

To navigate these dynamic lighting transitions effectively, Tsutsui collaborated closely with Video Engineer Joey Lopez. “Joey’s artistic touch allows him to shade the picture, enhancing the overall visual narrative,” comments Tsutsui. “We started with a daylight setting of 5,600K, and then we carefully identified the optimal moment to shift the color temperature to 4,600K as we approached twilight. This moment coincided with the ceremonial section of the show. This color temperature worked particularly

well given the ceremonial context. We had to be mindful of portraying Her Holiness Shinso Ito, the current head of Shinnyo-en and one of the few women to become a Buddhist master and attain the highest priestly rank of Daisojo. It’s crucial that Her Holiness’s skin tone appeared healthy and warm on camera. Since numerous viewers from across the globe tune into the event, we were particularly attentive to how lighting impacted her on-screen appearance. My followspots were adjusted slightly above the 4,600K setting, and I took measures to counteract any green hues in the lighting, ensuring a clean and vibrant presentation. The attention to these details is vital for achieving the desired lighting and aesthetic experience for both the live audience and those watching from afar.”

When asked about his sources of inspiration in lighting and production, Tsutsui replied, “As an artist, my creative curiosity never stops. I don’t typically conduct research in a traditional sense. If I have a specific project with a theme or concept, I might look through various images, often finding myself going down a rabbit hole of pictures. However, I can never predict when or where my inspiration will strike. I try to remain open and observant of my surroundings—the environment and the world around me are my sources of inspiration. Whenever I experience a spark of creativity, I think to myself, ‘What if...’ and I often take pictures to capture those moments. As a result, I have a large collection of images to refer back to. This forms my creative workflow, which, in a sense, never stops.”

He concludes, “I am deeply inspired and incredibly fortunate to participate in this significant gathering that brings us all together. Even after so many years, about 250 people are working tirelessly on this event. I’m filled with awe as I stand back from the backstage, looking at the massive rig and staging. The sheer number of people, the sweat and labor, and the financial resources that go into this event are staggering. Yet, it’s our creativity that brings it all to life. I feel blessed to be part of this journey.” **PLSN**

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