Eyes On... Absolute Action

Managing Director, Emma Dawson-Tarr, talks to A1 Lighting about what has inspired and challenged Absolute Action over the years.

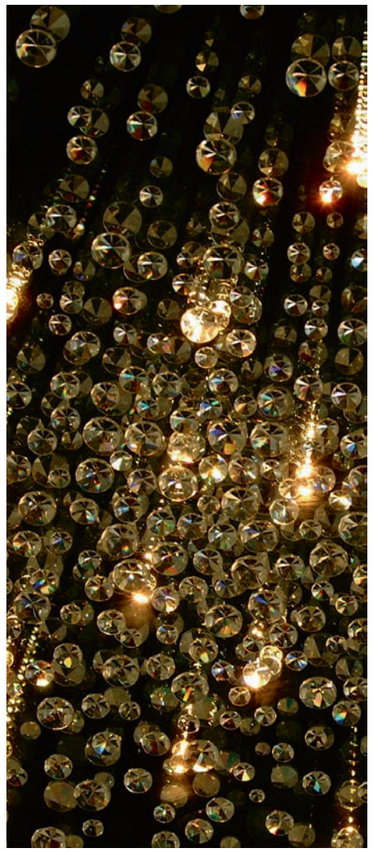
When and where did the Absolute Action story begin?

Emma: David and I set up Absolute Action in 1983 in serviced offices in Chiswick, inspired by an idea about animating holograms with moving lights – so in almost prehistoric times, from today's lighting industry perspective! We rolled our sleeves up and built all sorts of moving illuminated signs, animated lighting effects and even stage sets in fibre optics – some of which are still going strong in our showroom today.

It wasn't until we came up with the art of applying lenses to fibre outputs (for the first installation at The Imperial War Museum in 1988) that real lighting notionally became feasible. The first optically-controllable HID lamps – becoming available at around the same time – enabled us to extend the offering into a genuinely alternative form of practical lighting in the early 90's.

Looking back, it was all pretty pioneering and 'can-do' stuff – from the massive high atrium for the Bentalls Shopping Centre in Kingston-upon-Thames, to the Korean War Veterans' Memorial in Washington DC and the Mausoleum of Mohammed V in Rabat to name but a few. Almost every project we undertook in those days was, effectively, just another prototype on a more or less massive (and risky) scale for a lighting technology that we were still busily evolving as we went along.

We did then – and still do now – a tremendous amount of trialling and testing before committing to a finished fibre optic lighting solution, as there are just so many variables inherent in the technology.



What has been your biggest challenge to date, and how have you overcome it?

Emma: Well, it was all pretty challenging pretty much all of the time to start with – any pioneering activity is. But it has never been dull and we are constantly learning and coming up with new solutions – although most are variations on an original, tried-and-tested theme these days.

When our first white-light HID lighting installation went in and we were told it was changing colour, that was rather disconcerting; and when the manufacturers realised that was caused by their lamp being unstable and withdrew it from the market, our fledgling lighting offer went into free-fall! But we survived that.

Probably our biggest recent challenge came when more reliable and better performing LED products arrived to challenge our more traditional markets at the same time as the start of the current economic turmoil froze work on many of our niche high end and spectacular projects. Fancy foibles and glittering galaxies just weren't on the table any more. That was something of a double whammy. But we have adapted and adjusted and re-honed our core skills of ingenious integration into complex architectural structures. We are now expanding our work in the high net worth residential market, as well as broadening our offer in the heritage sector. In this way our projects continue to be challenging and varied – and therefore always interesting.

What has been your most exciting project to date and why?

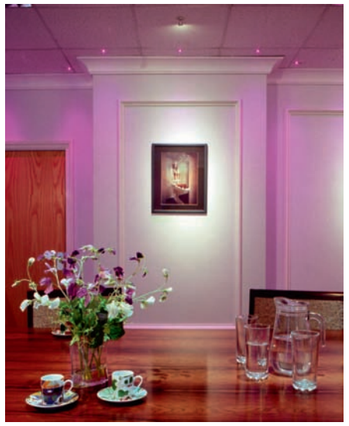
Emma: Possibly the most newsworthy project was the lighting of The Hope Diamond for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC.

It is the most viewed museum exhibit in the world and has an eye-watering value – never travelling without several armed bodyguards – and is set in a glorious array of white diamonds. But the blue of the Hope Diamond is incredibly unresponsive to light. So we had to fire the highest possible intensity of shape-imaged light just into the blue to make this dance and sparkle while addressing the white diamonds with more subdued illumination. Oh, and of course the whole thing keeps moving to display in four quadrants for maximum viewing opportunity, so the four sets of fibre optic lights were switching on and off as well while the display revolved.

We installed it in 1997. I was back in Washington last summer, and it is still as stunning as ever.

Despite the excitement of The Hope, maybe my personal favourites were the quaint little grey moon rocks and scoops of moon dust that we lit at the same time – surprisingly drab little things to be surrounded by so much muttering and secrecy.

But every project is interesting and exciting, as every project is different; and nearly always the finished result is even better than expected, which is so fulfilling.



What differentiates you from other fibre Optic Lighting Companies?

Emma: Absolute Action specialises solely in applied fibre optic lighting systems, and we are completely independent of all the other manufacturers. We have a singular concentration and focus, and are not constrained to specify any particular brand or type of fibre optic – glass or PMMA. So we are free always to choose the very best for the application concerned. We have also, over the years, designed and fabricated such an enormous array of optical end fixtures to solve the dramatically diverse range of lighting challenges that we have overcome that the optical toolkit at the disposal of our clients is absolutely vast.

We also install most of our systems and – most notably – undertake the final focusing. It is this latter exercise which ultimately seals the fate of the installation and makes it stand out from any other kind of lighting – tailoring each light-head to its specific task. This is a unique art.

What benefits can Fibre Optic Lighting provide that LEDs alone cannot?

Emma: Fibre optics – as long as you are assured of using the best quality glass fibre – is an entirely permanent lighting solution. The light projecting heads at output need never, ever, again be accessed for maintenance – so it will always be the best solution for high level lighting (canopies and atria and high level exterior lighting), wet area lighting (fountains, swimming pools, rills etc.), and lighting that is built into the architectural fabric of a building. Maintenance of a single lamp in an accessible source box will always be quicker, easier and cheaper than maintaining, say, 40 individual lights. It means also that the lit environment can be permanently sealed and secured, for the genuine preservation of some of the most precious or fragile objects.

The technology is proven, reliable and repeatable – so maintainable into the foreseeable future and beyond.

Energy consumption is known to be low, as a single lamp really can generate extremely powerful light output from a large number of individual light heads. Very few other high-performance lighting technologies are so energy efficient.

And – last but not least – once focused and fixed, the lighting remains always in true, pristine and undisturbed condition. Because maintenance is remote, the original lighting aesthetic is maintained in perfect performance – forever.

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